

SECRET AGENT INSIDERS TO WHITENESS: MIXED RACE WOMEN  
NEGOTIATING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

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## **ABSTRACT**

SILVIA CRISTINA BETTEZ: Secret Agent Insiders to Whiteness: Mixed Race Women  
Negotiating Structure and Agency  
(Under the direction of George Noblit)

In this dissertation, I explore the life stories of sixteen adult mixed race women who have one white parent and one parent who is a person of color. I examine how these women navigate their hybridity, what we can learn from their stories in our efforts to communicate across lines of racial difference, and what experiences the participants share that cross racial and ethnic lines. Data sources include multiple individual and group interviews with predominately middle-class, educated women living in San Francisco/Oakland, Albuquerque, and Boston. I coded the interview transcripts for themes and patterns and situated my analyses in relation to discourses of postcolonial hybridity, multiraciality, and social justice.

In relation to navigating hybridity, the women's experiences reveal an interplay between personal agency, claimed through fluid identities, and limitations to social mobility and acceptance created by social, cultural, and institutional structures. When asked or compelled to choose, all participants chose to align themselves with people of color. I identify several factors that contribute to their ability to communicate across lines of racial difference including physical ambiguity, learning about multiple world views early in life, keen observation, and active listening. Several shared experiences emerged that crossed racial lines. The women in my study largely rejected their white identities, experienced their identities in fluid ways despite this rejection, claimed the

right to self-identify racially/ethnically, and sought community with other mixed race people. One of the most significant findings is the degree to which many of the participants' stories were dedicated to discussions of cultural whiteness, which they viewed as inextricably linked to racism and white supremacy.

This work adds to the small but growing field of mixed race studies and provides information on improving education for social justice. These narratives serve as embodied experiences of hybridity, challenging the disembodied postcolonial hybridity theories prevalent in the literature that disregard the actual lived experiences of “hybrid”/mixed race people. The stories and analysis also reveal ways in which racism and white privilege are enacted on social and institutional levels, and raise questions about theories of diversity built on racial binaries.

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## Introduction, Methods, and Positionality

### *Hispanic Festival, Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1975*

*White woman: Hi Sonia, who is this you have with you?*

*Mom: (proudly) This is my daughter, Silvia*

*White woman: She's so pretty. When did you adopt her?*

I am a mixed-race woman, the daughter of a dark-skinned Latina and a white father. In the scene above, I was five years old attending a “Hispanic Festival” with my mom. We had recently moved from Lawrence, a working class town with a predominately Latino/a and black population to Andover, a virtually all-white, upper middle class town. My parents moved before I started kindergarten; they wanted me to attend “good schools.” I remember that day at the “Hispanic Festival” vividly; I was happy to be back in Lawrence, it felt familiar. The air was filled with *música Latina* – *salsa, cumbia, merengue*. Aromas from various food vendors reminded me of my mom’s cooking. The Spanish that was spoken was familiar even though I could not discern the words. My mom and I were having fun that day. She bought me *empanadas* and *limonada*. We danced on the concrete next to the DJ table. I didn’t notice back then how my light skinned hand contrasted against my mom’s brown skin. Later in life, as I further acquired several of my mom’s mannerisms, facial expressions and attitude I would be told on several occasions – usually by my father, “you certainly are your mother’s daughter!” but not that day. That day was one of several times when someone would attempt to deny that I am my mother’s daughter.

My lived experience as a woman who straddles two ethnicities and cultures has led me to personal, academic, and paid work that centers on forging connections across difference. Through my work over the years as an activist, community educator, college instructor, and scholar I have always strived to eradicate oppression through education. In each role, my goal has been to find ways to promote equity. Hierarchies are built on emphasizing *inequity* in differences (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). I believe that the more intimately interconnected people feel, the less separation, segregation and oppression there will be. This belief and my mixed race identity led me to seek out life stories by mixed race women. For this project, I conducted extensive interviews with 16 biracial women in three parts of the United States. I approached this project with the hope that the voices of mixed race women, who simultaneously embody racially/ethnically oppressed and privileged identities, could speak directly to the challenges of deconstructing hierarchies. In the following chapters I provide glimpses of their lives through themes that collectively tell new stories. To situate myself in relation to their words, I begin by sharing glimpses of the stories of my life.

Being mixed is a core part of my identity. My mother is Colombian and was born and raised in Bogotá; my Father is French-Canadian and was born and raised in Massachusetts. I was born in Bogotá and raised most of my life in Massachusetts in a suburb of Boston. My dad met my mom in Colombia while doing work there through a church program. They fell in love, got married, and soon after had me. When I was less than a year old, they moved to the United States. My mom was determined to learn English quickly. Knowing that the more you speak a language the faster you learn it, she refused to speak anything but English at home; we learned English together. My dad,



although fluent in Spanish and a bilingual elementary school teacher, never spoke to me in Spanish. As a result, English is my first language. My mom, who is extremely bright and very driven, spoke English within a year. I did not learn Spanish until I was seven years old when we returned to Bogotá; we lived there for one year at the end of which I was fluent (at the level of an eight year old) in Spanish.

My experiences as a light-skinned biracial, bicultural, and bilingual woman have instilled in me a passion to learn more about the mixed race experiences of other women. There have been formative moments in my life where being mixed became particularly salient.

***Middle School Locker Room, North Andover, Massachusetts, 1983***

*(Setting: A group of girls are huddled in the locker room talking. I am standing 10 feet away getting my things together after gym class. My small, worn purse lies on the table in front of me.)*

*Tracy: Hey guys, did you notice my new pocket book?*

*Tara: Oh my god, I totally love it. Is it a Dooney & Bourke?*

*Tracy: Yeah, my dad got it for me when we took our trip to Florida. I told him that I needed one to go with my new outfit.*

*Tracy: (looking over at me, in a fake voice) Your pocket book is cute too.*

*(The girls in the huddle giggle and continue to talk. A few minutes later they begin to leave. Before they reach the door I speak)*

*Me: (face turning red, blurts out) Tracy, you're a fucking snob!*

*Tracy: Why don't you go ride your llama!*

*Me: What is that supposed to mean?*

*Tracy: Well you're from Colombia aren't you? Why don't you go back to where you came from!*

Throughout K -12, except for the year I lived in Colombia, I struggled to find my place among my wealthy, predominately white peers. I did well in school academically, but among my peers I felt like an outsider in many ways. Even though at times I fit in, there were always moments when my classmates reminded me that being Colombian made me different. Rarely did I claim my voice and stand up to them, and when I did,

they quickly reminded me that I did not belong. I stood out not only in terms of race, but also in terms of class. Many of my peers' parents held jobs as top executives, doctors, even professional sports players. My mom was a social worker and my dad an elementary school teacher; even though we had plenty of money I often felt like I was looked upon as poor by my classmates. Additionally, I had a feminist analysis that positioned me yet again as an outsider in relation to my peers. My feminist mom consciously taught me about gender bias, and I was able to see sexism that was invisible to most of the people around me. I longed for the company of peers who had a similar gender role analysis, and I wanted to learn more about feminism. When the time came to explore options upon high school graduation, with my parents' encouragement and support, I decided to pursue a degree in women's studies. Having felt trapped and at times alienated in a predominately white high school, I was determined to attend a university where diversity was valued.

My desire to be on a diverse campus that had a women's studies major led me on a path to the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC). I visited UCSC during spring break. There were virtually no students around, but the fliers on campus advertised a variety of cultural groups and events making it seem as if people of color would have a large and central presence on campus.

My first semester at Santa Cruz I took a "Women Writers" class through the Women's Studies department. Being a naïve 18 year old, and having been misled by the multitude of fliers around campus relating to campus diversity groups, I was surprised to find that all the other women in the class were white. The instructor was also a white woman; however, the course included readings by an ethnically and racially diverse

group of women authors. In class discussions, I discovered that my perspective in response to the readings was most often contradictory to the other students, and I knew that my “different” perspective was due, at least in part, to the fact that I am not only white. They, however, assumed that I was white (like them) and when I shared my perspective, I was dismissed because what I said did not match their beliefs...

***Women Writers Class, UCSC, 1988***

***Scene One***

*Them: The author sounds really angry, so angry that her work is not accessible. I don't think she has to be that angry to get her point across. I didn't really like this reading.*

*Me: Of course she's angry; she's talking about her life, about being discriminated against as a Black woman.*

*Them: Still...*

*Me: (Silence)*

***Scene Two***

*Them: I think that women are more oppressed than people of color.*

*Me: (to myself “What????”) (angrily) Women **are** people of color.*

*Them: I know, I just ... You don't have to get angry.*

*Me: (Silence)*

My anger and inability to relate to my classmates' perceptions left me tongue-tied. At times I tried to speak up, but I was silenced, until they learned that I am Latina, a “woman of color.” Only then did they want to hear what I had to say which was subsequently glorified, essentialized, and othered.

The most life-changing experience from that class resulted from being introduced to the book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa. I had failed the required UC writing entrance exam and was assigned to work with a tutor who was another student of color. I talked with her about my experiences in the women writer's class, explaining my struggles of feeling like an “other” while simultaneously feeling bad about calling myself a “woman of color” as a white-skinned woman. However, because of my life experiences I did not identify as white. I felt caught between the

identifications of “white woman” and “woman of color,” forced to choose an identification as a woman of color but feeling like that did not acknowledge the entirety of who I am. No other option for self-identification had occurred to me until I was introduced to *Borderlands*. In this richly contextualized book Anzaldúa writes about a variety of borderlands including physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands. She defines a new space, a new identity -the *mestiza* - a place where there is a tolerance for ambiguity and room for growth. In *Borderlands* I found a home, an identity where I could claim all parts of me, the identity of *mestiza*.

It had never occurred to me to call myself “mixed” before reading Anzaldúa’s book; the prevalence of binaries in society did not allow me to imagine claiming a mixed race identity. The *mestiza* literally embodies the message that connection across difference and tolerance for ambiguity is imperative. Without the acceptance of plurality and ambiguity, *mestiza* people don’t exist. For the *mestiza* this creates what Anzaldúa (1987) calls “psychic restlessness.” She says, “Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (p. 78). I know this war on a personal level. I have lived it. It is crazy-making. But for me waging the inner war is worth it because my existence and the existence of other *mestizas*, mixtures of people of all kinds, helps to keep people from seeing the world as *us* and *them*. After reading the words of Anzaldúa, I began to accept my identity by, “developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (p. 79). This does not negate the value of honoring distinct cultures, even for those of us who are mixed, but it allows for points of connection in the face of difference.

As I learned to embrace the ambiguity of my identity, I learned to cherish the ways it enhanced my ability to connect to others. Because of my bicultural identity I was forced to move between and within cultural groups that did not always feel like home. Maria Lugones (1990) in her article, “Playfulness, ‘World’–Travelling, and Loving Perception” argues that “outsiders” to the mainstream white/Anglo culture acquire “flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life to other constructions of life where she is more or less ‘at home’” (p. 390). She calls this flexibility “‘world’ traveling” and recommends, “to women of color in the U.S. to learn to love each other by travelling to each other’s ‘worlds’” (p. 390). I have been fortunate in my life to have been invited to travel into the “worlds” of other women of color. Those experiences helped me to heal from the effects of being the victim to what Lugones calls “arrogant perception.” Arrogant perception, she says, is “systematically organized to break the spirit” of people.

Many of my middle school, high school, and college classmates viewed me through this lens of arrogant perception and positioned me as the subordinate, stereotyped “other.” Sometimes, even those who expressed interest in my opinions, as the women eventually did in my Women Writers class, often seemed to do so from a self-serving position rather than through a desire to make connection. Lugones calls us to action to perceive others through “loving eyes” by travelling to each other’s worlds in a way that is playful and non-judgmental, a way that promotes identification rather than separateness. She says, “The reason why I think that traveling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them is because by traveling to their ‘world’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have travelled to

each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (p. 401). Although throughout my life I have experienced the benefit of "world" traveling, I have often felt unsure of where to call home.

I am fortunate to have two incredibly loving extended families. On both sides my grandparents, aunts, and uncles love me for who I am. This support carries me through all the arrogant perception challenges I face. However, even though they love me, they don't always understand my mixed race life. Once I was introduced to the concept of mixed race identity I wanted to make connection with other mixed race people in hopes of finding shared experiences.

I concentrated much of my undergraduate studies on learning about the experiences of mixed race people. My work culminated in an undergraduate thesis based on interviews with eight mixed race women titled, *Women of Mixed Heritage Living on the Borders of Whiteness and Color: Reconstructing Whole Selves*. The interviews, and the accompanying readings, helped me to find connection with others and validate my identity as a mixed race woman. Since then I have also learned to also embrace identities as a Latina and as a woman of color. I hold all three positionalities simultaneously. Although I have a wide range of interests and have held a variety of roles since that time, I have longed to return to conducting qualitative research with mixed race people.

I approach this project with a search for meaning in relationship to issues of social justice: What can these women's stories tell us about how to better communicate cross culturally? What do their stories reveal about racial politics? How do their multiple positionalities in relationship to gender, race, class, and sexuality affect the ways in which they claim agency and are limited by structure?

## **Participant Selection and Overview**

Hoping to understand how mixed people navigate both dominant and subordinate cultures, I narrowed my participants to people who have one white parent and one parent who is a person of color. I decided to focus my efforts on hearing the experiences of adults; participants were required to be at least 18 years old. In addition I decided to limit my participants to women. There were several reasons for this choice. First, with such a broad topic and potential participant pool, I wanted to find ways to narrow the characteristics of my participants. Second, as a feminist, I wanted to engage in feminist research. Richardson, Taylor, & Whittier (2001) assert that feminist scholarship, “emphasizes the sources of power that women find: how they define themselves, influence their social contexts, and resist the restrictions that they face” (p. 2). Third, in a pilot project I conducted, women participants told me explicitly that they were more likely to share personal stories about being mixed in group interviews that included women exclusively. Fourth, because of women’s ability to give birth, mixed race women hold a particular position in history, especially in relation to the eugenics movement that pushed supposed scientific objection to racial mixing.

Knowing that people’s experiences might be quite different depending on where they were raised and where they lived, I decided to conduct interviews in a variety of US cities. In addition to two in-depth interviews with each participant, I also conducted a group interview with all of the participants in each location. Originally I planned to conduct interviews in the four corners of the United States. Before beginning my official dissertation research, I conducted a pilot study in the Southeast interviewing young women in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina; six women participated. I decided

that for this project I would also conduct interviews in the Northeast (Boston, MA), the Northwest (San Francisco/Oakland, CA), and the Southwest (Albuquerque, NM). My original goal was to interview approximately five people in each city. Because I did not set out to compare participants from each city, it was not important to have exact equal numbers of participants from each city. Furthermore, as I learned in my pilot study, participants in one city might have grown up in different areas and thus not represent a specific connection to the place in which they resided at the time of the interviews. As a resident of Durham, NC at the time of this work, I set out to conduct interviews in the other three cities first.

I approached this project with very broad research questions. Foremost, I wanted to hear the life stories of women in relationship to their families, friends, school, and work and see what themes and patterns emerged. I gathered my participants through snowball sampling (Glesne, 1999, p. 29). In the flier I used to attract potential study participants (see flier, appendix A) I wrote,

I am a doctoral student of mixed heritage collecting stories from other women who identify as mixed for a dissertation research project. You have a unique story to tell, and I want to hear your story. The goal of this project is to learn about the life histories of mixed race women who have one white parent and one parent who is a person of color (Latino/a, African-American, Native-American, Asian/Asian-American, etc.). I live in Durham, NC but will be doing interviews June-Sept 2006 in and around the following cities: Albuquerque, NM; San Francisco/Oakland, CA; and Boston, MA. If you live in or near the cities listed above, and think you might be interested, call Silvia or e-mail. I can tell you more about the project and you can decide whether or not you want to participate.

I sent the flier via email to friends, family, and colleagues and asked them to send it to anyone who they knew in the three cities where I was conducting interviews. I asked my friends and family living in those cities to print and distribute the flier anywhere they thought they might reach mixed race women. For my pilot project, I had advertised



through college campus listserves, but I wanted this project to include a broader range of participants in terms of age, socioeconomic status, education, and occupation so I purposely chose not to concentrate my efforts on university students. As soon as the flier was distributed, I began receiving phone calls.

Because I wanted a small number of participants from each city, I found that I did not need to advertise through other methods. I responded to everyone who inquired about the project and interviewed everyone who met the criteria of the study and who could meet with me during the time I would be visiting her city. In the end I had five participants from the Oakland/San Francisco area, four participants from Albuquerque, and seven from Boston for a total of sixteen participants. The Albuquerque number was low because two participants who I had scheduled to interview ended up leaving town last minute and could not participate. The Boston interview was highest, perhaps in part because the coordinator of a mixed race organization received my flier in time to advertise my project in their newsletter which was distributed to over 100 people. All of my Boston participants were members of that organization.

When I returned to North Carolina, after my research in the other three cities, I reviewed my field notes and realized that little had emerged in my earlier local pilot project that had not emerged in my interviews in the other cities. The interviews from the three cities I had visited already provided me with the stories and rich data I needed for this project. In addition, having sixteen participants was already stretching the bounds of a feasible number for the readers of the project to hold. As such, I decided to forgo the local interviews for this project and never conducted further Southeast interviews beyond those in my pilot project. I do not include the pilot project interviews as part of the data

here because I had not yet attained IRB approval, and although I had several women with one white parent and one parent of color, I had not limited my original project to women with that specific racial mixture.

In figure 2-1, I provide an overview of the participants in terms of age, parents' ethnicities/race, where they grew up (for most of their lives), where they lived at the time of the interview, whether or not they passed for white, their sexuality, their education level, their socioeconomic status growing up, and their current class status. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 58 with the average age being 32. Five of the participants had moms of color, eleven had dads of color. The races/ethnicities included are: black/African American, Mexican, Peruvian, Filipino, Somali, Japanese, and white (including Jewish, Norwegian, and Polish). I had hoped to have people of American-Indian descent included, but only two people with Native heritage responded and neither of them could meet with me during the times I was visiting their city. Most of the participants grew up in cities, some in suburbs of cities, and only two in small towns. They were all living in the Bay Area, Boston, or Albuquerque at the time of the interviews. There was a continuum of passing from almost always being perceived as white to almost never, but only three participants could never pass for white.

There were several participants who self identified as queer. Eight of the women identified as queer, lesbian, and/or bisexual. The other eight identified as straight. The number of queer-identified participants may be particularly high because I, in part, spread the word through my personal network. I identify as queer as do many of my friends, so it would follow that several of their contacts may be queer-identified as well. However, the Boston participants had no direct connections to any of my friends since they learned

about the project through a mixed race organization and there were three queer/bi participants out of seven. It is difficult to gather data about percentages of the US population who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual because it is such a sensitive topic. There are debates in the literature, but one of the most liberal estimates is that only one out of ten people in the US have relationships with people of the same sex (Wikipedia, Demographics of Sexual Orientation, 2007, ¶ 14).

This was a highly educated group of women. All but one participant had at least her BA. The participant who did not have her bachelor's degree was one of the younger participants (age 26). She had gone to cosmetology school upon graduating high school but dropped out due to sexual harassment. She talked of desires to get her degree but was not sure in what field. Ten of the participants had taken at least some graduate courses. Three were in the process of getting their master's degrees and four others already had master's degrees. In addition, the majority of them talked about doing well in school throughout their lives.

It is harder to define class status than some of the other positionality variables, in some ways because class is an even more fluid category than the others. In follow-up emails to all participants after the interviews, I asked each of them to position themselves in terms of class status such as working class, lower middle class, middle class, etcetera. I asked them to please tell me what socioeconomic level they were raised in most of their lives and also where they would position themselves in terms of class currently. All but three participants – Brittney, Ruth, and Katherine – responded to my request; I determined their class status based upon the information they shared about their lives.

Table 1: Participant Overview										
Name	Age	Mom	Dad	Grew Up	Lives	Pass	Sexuality	Education	Class Raised	Current Class
Maria	34	White	Mexican	Phoenix	Albuquerque	Yes	Queer	MA	lower middle class	middle class
Ana	32	British	Filipino	Los Angeles	Albuquerque	Yes	Queer	BA	middle class	Upper middle
Brittney	26	White	Black	Albuquerque	Albuquerque	No	Straight	HS Diploma	middle class	working class
Janet	25	White	Mexican	Kansas City	Albuquerque	Yes	Straight	BA	middle	lower middle
Linda	30	Japanese	White Polish	San Francisco	Oakland	Yes	Queer	BA	working class	working to low mid
Marta	46	White/Jewish	Peruvian	Suburb SF	Oakland	Yes	Queer	BA	working class	middle class
Alana	32	White	Black	LA	Oakland	No	Queer	Getting MA	middle class	middle class
Bobbi	26	White	Somali	Phoenix	San Fran	Yes	Straight	MA	middle	middle
Tina	24	White	Mexican	Suburb of San Francisco	Oakland	Yes	Straight	Getting MA	working to middle	middle class
Diana	58	White	African-American	Buffalo, NY	Boston	Yes	Straight	MA	working class	Upper middle
Ruth	34	Russian Jewish	African-American	Chicago	Boston	No	Queer	MA	lower middle	middle class
Joanna	23	Black	White	suburb of Philadelphia	Boston	Yes	Queer	Getting MA	lower middle	middle class
Katherine	27	Black	White	suburb of Philadelphia	Boston	Yes	Straight	BA, about to get MA	middle	middle
Elizabeth	31	Filipino	White	Philadelphia	Boston	Yes	Straight	MA	middle	middle
Mindy	33	Filipino	White	Upstate NY	Boston	Yes	Straight	BA, some Grad	working class	lower middle
Susan	36	Norwegian	Mexican	SE Mass	Boston	Yes	Bisexual	BA	upper middle	middle class

Some people simply stated their class position in a few words such as, “I am middle class.” Several, however, qualified their responses and troubled the class categories. For example, Susan said, “I don't know the official guidelines for what income positions you where, but I think we are middle class.” Marta said,

I was raised working class (my dad was a cabinet maker and we owned a small home). I am currently middle class in my income/job but I hope I retain my working class values and sensibilities. Also, I wanted to point out that working class is just part of the lower class income spectrum - there is also poverty class. As I'm sure you're aware many folks with working class jobs actually earn middle class income - plumbers, electricians, or some other trades and even though there isn't job status and more possible health issues from the work. This is very far from a poverty class existence.

Alana explained her class background in equally complex terms:

I was raised middle-class. I was also raised around a great deal of wealth in Santa Monica and did not actually understand my class standing until I found myself in circles with predominantly work-class people of color. I always assumed that I was working class because I grew up in apartment buildings with my single mom opposed to living in a large house. Though I am a financially struggling grad student I still consider myself to be a member of the middle class because I don't think one ever moves down, so to speak, the class hierarchy. I still have access to certain privileges and power through my cultural capital. If you are qualifying my current class standing just based on income, I probably would be lumped into the working-class, but I was raised middle class.

Their self-positioning stories remind us that class status is derived from a complex set of factors including but not limited to income, the type of job someone holds, cultural capital, and instilled class values. Furthermore, how people view themselves in terms of class is impacted by the class positionality of the people around them. For example, Alana above said she assumed she was working class growing up because of the wealth that surrounded her, but later realized her cultural whiteness meant she was more middle class.

Ultimately, all of the participants asserted a middle class standing, lower to upper, at the time of the interviews and most were raised middle class. Thus, this project provides insights into the specific experiences of formally educated, mostly middle class, mixed race women. One benefit of this specialized group is that their stories provide particular insights into how to successfully navigate predominantly white institutions.

### **Interpretivist, Constructivist Paradigm**

This is an exploratory, ethnographic study based primarily on interviews. There were few specific questions that I hoped to have answered. The main goal was to hear people's life stories, thus qualitative ethnographic research made the most sense. Glesne (1999) argues that, "people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized worldview" (p. 8). Goodall (2000) similarly states that "ethnographic fieldwork and the writing that comes of it is less a formal method of inquiry than it is a disciplined attitude and conversational style that I have learned to make a way of life" (p. 21). I don't feel like I choose qualitative research as much as it chooses me. Doing ethnographic work was a "natural" extension of how I view the world and what interests me.

Ethnography has a history situated in a positivist paradigm in which the ethnographer set out to "discover" how cultures operated through "objective" observation and non-leading questions (Glesne, 1999; Van Maanen, 1988; Goodall, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Clifford (1983) writes that historically ethnographers emphasized "objectively" gathering stories. He cites Malinowski who in his ethnographic book *Argonauts*, published in 1922, "was greatly concerned with the rhetorical problem of

convincing his readers that the facts he was putting before them were objectively acquired, not subjective creations” (Clifford, p. 123).

However, there has been a shift in the role of an ethnographic researcher among those who write about ethnography as a discipline and those who conduct ethnography; the role of the ethnographer is now realized as one that is as much about interpretation and construction as it is about documenting experience. Ethnographers have moved away from a realist paradigm to more interpretive and/or constructivist paradigms (Clifford, 1983; Glesne, 1999; Goodall, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). Lincoln & Guba (2000) argue that “objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower” (p. 181). Clifford (1983) maintains that, “experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic processes are at work, discordantly, in any ethnography” (p. 142). Ethnography is about the “interpretation of cultures” and “representations of dialogue” (Clifford, 1983, p. 131 & 134). Others have similarly argued that ethnography is not about pursuing or establishing a single “truth” but is about creating and uncovering various constructions of social reality (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Glesne, 1983; Goodall, 2000; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).

It is from the interpretivist, constructivist paradigm that I approach my work and this project. My role as a researcher is interpretive. I assume that meaning is constructed through negotiation among individuals, both between the participants and also between participants and myself as the (participant-)researcher. I believe, along with Conquergood (2003) that “ethnography is an embodied practice” (p. 353). I approached my work as a participant-observer. Clifford (1993) argues that, “Participant-observation

serves as shorthand for a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events; on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in the wider contexts” (p. 127). I walked this line of a simultaneous insider and outsider, a participant and a researcher.

As a participant-researcher, I have a prominent presence in this work. During both group and individual interviews, my role continuously shifted from asking questions to answering them, from facilitator to participant, and from listener to interpreter. Along with my participants, I also shared my own stories. I always kept sight of my role as a researcher and in some interviews my role mostly involved asking questions. However, there were some individual interviews which were – by virtue of connections in age, experience, and a multitude of other factors, including prompting by the participants – much more dialogical in nature. In the group interviews, I positioned myself explicitly as both a facilitator *and* participant and encouraged participants to ask questions of each other and of me.

As a participant-researcher, I took a reflexive approach to my work. Reinharz (1997) argues that we “*create* the self in the field” (p. 3) I found myself being created in the process of these interviews in multiple ways through interactions with my participants. My positionality as a mixed race woman created an initial point of connection and sometimes comfort with my participants. In addition, other factors of social positionality often united us; for example, Latina participants were able to bring in words and phrases in Spanish and I could respond knowingly which enhanced our connection. My queer positionality also created a point of connection with queer



participants. I came out to all of my queer participants in hopes of creating a sense of comfort for them to share stories that related to their sexual identities.

Other times factors of social positionality divided us. For example, as I met with Diana, she spoke of being able to slip in and out of Ebonics and I wondered how different our interview interaction, and her speech, might have been if she had read me as someone able to understand and speak Ebonics. In acknowledgement of my presence as a participant-researcher, I include my voice as both a participant and researcher in the writing of this study. Lincoln & Guba (2000) state that reflexivity, “demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our lives” (p. 183). Because this work is directly connected the “contradictions” and “paradoxes” of my life as a middle-class, formally educated, queer, mixed race woman, I have consciously asked myself and others, “what is it that I might be missing here?” and I am conscientious about issues historically related to validity, though more contemporarily thought of in terms of trustworthiness.

### **Project Goals: Critical, Self-Reflexive Ethnography**

Validity is problematized in constructivist paradigms. Whereas in the past ethnographers such as Malinowski struggled to claim that researcher objectivity could help to ensure valid results, as a “new ethnographer” (Goodhall, 2000) I struggle instead to position my subjectivity. Acknowledging subjectivity, qualitative researchers offer strategies to ensure data are trustworthy as they argue that there is no one true or “valid” interpretation on the data. To describe trustworthiness in relationship to my study, I first need to describe the goals of my project, and the ways I approached the research. Geertz

(2003) defined the aim of anthropology as “the enlargement of the human discourse” (p. 153). First and foremost I think of my project, and qualitative work in general, as adding to human discourse. My goal was to “search for pattern and meaning rather than for prediction and control” (Reinharz, 1987 quoted in Lather, 2003, p. 192). I believe, like Clifford (1983) that with ethnographic writing, “it is more than ever crucial for different peoples to form complex concrete images of one another, as well as of the relationships of knowledge and power that connect them” (p. 119). I take a *critical* constructivist approach to this research. “Critical theory is committed to unveiling the political stakes that anchor cultural practices” (Conquergood, 2003, p. 351). In writing about the women in my study, I strive to maintain at least some of the complexities of their lives and interactions and to also locate their experiences in wider contexts of institutional and social power. Thus my approach is interpretive, constructivist, self-reflexive, and critical, particularly in the sense that it attends to issues of social power.

### **Research Questions**

There were three main broad research questions I had upon approaching this work. The first was: How do these women navigate their “hybridity,” and why does this matter? By hybridity, I refer to the women’s embodied mixed-race existence and the meaning of their life choices in relation to wider discourses. I wanted to explore “hybrid” experiences in various areas of life including education, family, social life, dating/marriage, and careers. Lincoln & Guba (2000) assert that,

Critical theorists, constructivists, and participatory/cooperative inquirers take their primary field of interest to be precisely that subjective and intersubjective social knowledge and the active construction and cocreation of such knowledge by human agents that is produced by human consciousness (pp. 176-177).

I was interested in understanding how the participants actively constructed their experiences as mixed race women and what their intersubjective social knowledge might tell us about issues related to race, gender, and power. I utilized the term “hybridity” strategically. In many contemporary post-colonial writing about hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; McLaren, 1997; Grossberg, 1996), it is discussed in abstract ways, disconnected from the actual lives of “hybrid” (mixed race) people and their experiences. I wanted to center these women’s voices in relationship to the theoretical conceptions of hybridity to serve as a reminder that hybridity is a lived experience.

The second research question I had as I approached this project was: What do the participants’ stories demonstrate about the ways people might better communicate and comprehend one another across lines of racial difference? In autobiographical writings, mixed race people often allude to having enhanced skills for moving in and out of various ethnic/racial communities (O’Hearn, 1998; Camper, 1994; Walker, 2001). In my pilot project, several of the participants talked at length about the ways in which they navigated cultural codes and expectations within various racial/ethnic communities. I wanted to examine the women’s stories for what they might tell us about intercultural communication and comprehension.

My third research question was: Are there shared experiences that U.S. mixed women identify with that cross racial/ethnic lines? I am interested in both the diversity and commonalities of the experiences of mixed race people. Mengel (2001), who conducted general research on the multiracial experience and conducted interviews with multiracial Asian individuals, argued that,

There appears to be a commonality, a level of comfort, a place where one does not have to code-switch, a level of unspoken understanding that is experienced by

mixed race in the company of others like them that is not found in their experiences with monoracial people (p. 122)

Mengel argues that multiracial individuals are creating a “panethnic” identity that is based on “mixedness” (p. 112). My study focuses on the experience of individuals living in the United States. Although there may be a shared, mixed, panethnic identity, individual racial formation is affected and bounded by the accompanying history of racial politics in which people live. How individuals situate themselves racially is impacted by the discourses of race that abound in the particular areas where they grew up and reside; location matters. My goal is to situate the women’s stories while analyzing them for interconnecting themes.

Even as I uncover the potential unities among mixed race women, I also remain committed to naming the disjunctures of “the” multiracial experience. Ifekwunigwe (2001), in her mixed race research asks,

How do we create political alliances forged from shared marginal status while also acknowledging the varied and inherently hierarchical power dynamics within, between, and among such disparate and differently racialised groups? (p. 45).

Mixed race status is an identification that exists amid a multitude of other identity categories and characteristics, these identifications carry the potential for disparate positions in institutional hierarchies. In other words, multiracial identifications and their subsequent implications are affected by people’s socioeconomic status, gender, location, skin color, family make-up, and countless other factors. Given this complexity, I am interested in learning about the contextualized experiences of mixed race women and analyzing those as they implicate, and are implicated by, the social and institutional structures in which we/they live.

## **Data Gathering**

To begin to find answers to my questions, I decided to conduct interviews with a variety of mixed race women in a variety of cities as described above. I spent a minimum of two weeks in each city and arranged interviews with those who responded to the flier I distributed. My goal was to conduct two individual interviews, 1.5 hours each in length, with each participant and a group interview with all participants in each location. I was able to follow through on my goal of two individual interviews with all but one participant; Bobbi and I were never able to coordinate our schedules for a second interview so I conducted a follow up through email. All the other women participated in two individual interviews with the exception of Maria, who participated in three interviews. Maria is a close personal friend of mine and she indulged me in three interviews as our conversations sometimes strayed on tangents and I felt I needed the extra time to capture her story in full. Our time together totaled approximately six hours. Most of the other participants interviewed with me individually for a total of 3 hours, although the total individual interview time with each participant ranged in length from 2 hours and 20 minutes to 4 hours.

I had 11 pre-set questions for the individual interview (see appendix B). The questions were broad and open ended. The first question was “tell me about who you are?” Other questions included, “Tell me about your family?” and “What was school like for you?” These questions were refined extensions of the questions I asked in my pilot study. As the participants responded to my questions, I asked follow-up questions based upon their answers. Thus each interview included a slightly different group of questions outside of the pre-set questions.

I began each interview with a statement to the effect of, “I have some broad questions for you but I really would like for you to tell whatever stories you wish to tell. I will ask you follow-up questions based on what you say. If there is a story you wish to share that doesn’t fit within any of my questions, please do so.” In her book on qualitative research, Glesne (1999) asserts that an interviewer should employ probes to learn as much as possible in response to each main question. Interviewing, she says, is a “‘what-else’ and ‘tell me more’ endeavor” (p. 87). This is how I approached my work; I employed probes requesting clarification, specific examples, self-analysis, and explanation. I conducted interviews in locations convenient for the participants and traveled across cities to meet participants in a variety of places including their homes, their workplaces, and local libraries. My only request was that we try to conduct each interview in at least a semi-private space for audio quality purposes. Before beginning first interviews with each participant, I explained the purpose of the study in detail and obtained written consent (see appendix C).

In addition to individual interviews, I conducted a group interview in each city. Fortunately, all but one participant (Janet) was able to participate in the group interview. Each group interview was approximately two hours in length. Participants were provided separate group interview consent forms (see appendix D) in which the risks and requirements of confidentiality were stressed. I had five pre-set group interview questions (see appendix E). In the group interview, participants were encouraged to ask each other questions and ground rules were established including that each person had the right to not answer a question posed to them.

In addition to the individual and group interviews, I incorporated, to a smaller extent, a few other data collection methods including short follow-up questions via email, participant-observation, artifact analysis, and document review. This population does not lend itself easily to participant-observation, especially since most of the participants did not belong to cohesive mixed race groups. I was, however, able to attend a social for the mixed race group in Boston that included two of my participants and approximately fifteen other mixed race people. At the event, a meeting at a Boston bar for happy hour, I introduced myself as a visiting doctoral researcher and a mixed race woman. I did not take notes during the event but wrote up field notes after the event. Attending this event was the only formal opportunity I had for participant-observation outside of the interviews.

Some participants did, however, share artifacts and documents with me. I encouraged the participants to bring to the interviews any writings, artifacts, or pictures that might help tell their stories. Several of the participants shared pictures of themselves and/or friends and family. This helped me to obtain a fuller picture of them in relation to significant people in their lives. Some of the women shared pictures of themselves as children where they looked quite different than they do as adults. Maria, for example, had skin color several shades darker as a child and teen than she did at the time of our interviews. One participant, Marta, shared with me an album of pictures of art she had created. A few participants gave me personal writings related to being mixed race. Two participants shared with me their “my space” online accounts which provided me visuals of some of their friends and insights into how they presented and described themselves in another context. I interviewed 9 of the participants in their homes, providing me another

insight into their lives. At five of those homes, I had the opportunity to peruse their bookcases.

After the interviews were completed I sent a few follow-up question emails, and some of my participants also sent me follow-up emails without specific prompting. At the end of the interviews I told each participant that she was welcome to write to me or call me with any information or new experiences she might want to add. Four people did this, sharing stories of, for example, a recent discussion with a parent about being mixed. After completing the transcription and coding I found that with a few participants I had particular questions so I emailed them asking for clarification. All the participants responded. Later, as I was finalizing my writing, I created a set of short specific questions I wanted to ask everyone. I sent individualized emails to each participant with the same set of questions. All but three responded.

All of the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. I conducted all of the interviews personally. During the interviews, I took extensive written field notes that included the participants' words as well as the setting and interactions before and after the interviews. I did my best to capture as many of their stories and words as possible in my written notes. Glesne (1999) argues that "all notes should be expanded upon later, preferably the same evening" (p. 50). Upon returning from the interviews, whenever possible, I reviewed my notes and wrote personal reflections immediately after. A few times I had interviews scheduled consecutively; in those circumstances, I would wait until my last interview was completed and then take time to review both interviews and jot down mental notes. I took note of the settings,



sights, sounds, and smells and the participants' dress, words, actions, and interactions (Glesne, 1999, p. 47-48).

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

I began to examine my field notes for codes and themes during the data collection. The visits to the three cities were scheduled consecutively, so I conducted the majority of my transcription and deeper analysis upon completion of all the interviews. I transcribed the group interviews first, coded them for themes, and looked for patterns. This served as my initial analysis and enabled me to create an initial coding schema. I then began to transcribe the individual interviews. It was my intent to personally transcribe all the interviews, but I did not have the time I needed to both write about the data and transcribe the interviews so I employed the help of a few friends, my sister, and a few paid transcriptionists to aid me. While I waited for the final transcriptions, I coded my written field notes and typed up an overview of each interview from the notes.

Glesne (1999) states that,

Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining, defining and sorting those scraps of collected data... that are applicable to your research. By putting like-minded pieces together in data clumps, you create an organizational framework... Eventually you can place the various data clumps in a meaningful sequence that contributes to the chapters or sections of your manuscript (p. 149).

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. I sorted and organized all the data collected; each data scrap was organized under a code such that nothing was omitted. After coding the group interviews and the first few individual interviews, I searched for common codes across them to more succinctly organize the data. Those original codes expanded and metamorphosed until all the data was accounted for from each interview.

Throughout the process I paid conscious attention to my biases and subjectivity asking myself questions similar to those posed by Glesne (1999):

Where do I not go? Where have I gone less often? With whom do I have special relationships, and in what light would they interpret phenomena? What data collection means have I not used that could provide additional insight? (p. 152)

In addition, I asked myself questions such as: Are there stories that dispute this analysis? Whose voices are most prominent in this section? Who is being left out and why? Are there follow up questions that I should ask? What are the words that are hardest to hear? What are the stories that feel most personally affirming? Am I including both affirming and disaffirming stories in my final product?

I identified eight major themes which I envisioned as the data chapters of this project. The themes were: 1) identity formation, 2) insider/outsider positionalities (negotiating structure), 3) ambiguity/fluidity (claiming agency), 4) definitions of and relationships to cultural whiteness, 5) passing, 6) bridge building and educating others, 7) racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, and 8) dating, mating, and kids. Due to the extensive volume of the data I collected, I selected only the first six themes to write about in this project, however, data from the last two themes are infused throughout the other six chapters.

### **Research Trustworthiness**

Different qualitative researchers argue for different methods to ensure trustworthiness. Lincoln & Guba (1985) stress the importance of “member checks,” sharing data analysis and interpretation with research participants to ensure accurate representation of their ideas (p. 110). Glesne (1999, p. 32) recaps eight procedures named by Creswell (1998, pp. 201-203) to verify research: 1) prolonged engagement and

persistent observation, 2) triangulation, 3) peer review and debriefing, 4) negative case analysis, 5) clarification of researcher bias, 6) member-checking, 7) rich, thick description, and 8) external auditing. Lather (2003, p. 191) offers four guidelines to trustworthiness: 1) triangulation, 2) construct validity (reflexivity that indicates how data has changed the a priori logic of theory), 3) face validity (member checks), and 4) catalytic validity (the degree to which participants are transformed by the research and compelled to use what they learn to better transform their lives).

There are several ways I attended to trustworthiness in relation to the suggestions of Lincoln & Guba, Glesne, and Lather. All of these authors stress the importance of member checks. It was my intent to share my writing with all my participants. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to do so to the extent I wanted for this initial project. I did, however, ask for input from all of the women on the general ways they were described and positioned as participants. I also did an extensive member check with one of the participants, Maria, asking for her input on my analysis and interpretations. I chose her because as a friend of mine, I had the best rapport with her. In addition, I knew that she had several mixed race friends and could think about the data in relation to more than just her own experience. Also, knowing her, I trusted that she would provide me her honest opinion, even if she disagreed with something I wrote.

Triangulation was also stressed by several authors (Creswell, 1999; Glesne, 1999; and Lather, 2003). Triangulation includes the use of “multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes” (Lather, p. 191). I utilized multiple data methods and sources including individual interviews, group interviews, document and artifact review, participant-observation, multiple geographic locations, and reflections on personal

experience as a mixed race woman. I also examined and articulated the stories in relation to several theoretical frameworks, as I will explain in the literature review.

In addition, I engaged in peer review and debriefing. This occurred foremost with my project advisor. I talked with him at length about my codes, analysis, and interpretation. Each time I asked, is there anything you see that I am missing? He challenged me to consider alternate data organizational structures and helped guide me in recognizing multiple viewpoints relating to the data. I also debriefed with friends. One of my friends transcribed 10 of my interviews; as a result she had a fairly broad overview of much of the data. I would talk with her about commonalities and contradictions she saw within and between interviews. She also shared with me what stories stood out most to her. This helped me to determine what might be of most relevance to my readers.

In the process of my writing and analysis I strived for rich, thick description to allow the reader “to enter into the research context” (Glesne, 1999, p. 32). In addition, I made a “conscious search for negative cases and unconfirming evidence” for my working analyses (Glesne, 1999, p. 32). I consciously worked to include any contradictions to my overall conclusions, allowing the reader to obtain the fullest picture possible in relation to each issue addressed. My chapter conclusions and final interpretations demonstrate construct validity in that “a priori theory” is sometimes changed by “the logic of the data” (Lather, 2003, p. 191). Participants’ self disclosures during second interviews of actions they took or wished to take as the result of the first interviews demonstrate “catalytic validity” as described by Lather. Lather describes catalytic validity as the degree to which research helps participants to rethink their lives and energizes them to engage in efforts toward social justice. As a critical researcher, this type of validity was especially

important. The group interviews especially helped participants to think about their own lives in relation to larger issues and challenges facing mixed race people, and to raise their critical consciousness about these issues.

### **Positionality**

There are five main positionalities from which I approach this work. I am 1) mixed race, 2) an ethnographer, 3) a sociologist, 4) a feminist, and 5) a critical theorist – I attend to issues of structure and power and strive to promote social justice. These positionalities help locate my relationship to my participants and my readers. As a mixed race woman, I am both a participant and a researcher in this project. As a critical ethnographer and sociologist, I approach the data from an interpretivist, constructivist paradigm paying attention to issues of power and oppression. As a feminist I strive to “illuminate the social and structural roots of our gendered experiences” (Richardson, Taylor, & Whittier, 2001, p. 2). It is from these positionalities that my theoretical frameworks and supporting literature emerge.

I recognize that,

Ethnography is from beginning to end enmeshed in writing. This writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. (Clifford, 1983, p. 120).

I am conscientious about my multiple subjectivities, my positionalities, and the political implications of my work. I maintain a critically self-reflexive approach to writing this ethnography and strive to maintain integrity and respect in relationship to my participants, my readers, and myself – tasks that sometimes lie in direct contradiction to each other. I acknowledge and draw upon the work of other ethnographers, mixed race

people, sociologists, feminists, and critical theorists to position these stories and my work in relationship to the voices and work of others. Collectively my writing, the participants' voices, and the situated theoretical frameworks add to the discourse on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and their relationships to issues of power, structure, and agency.

## **Social Construction, Hybridity, Multiracial Discourses, and Social Justice**

There are multiple angles from which to approach mixed race issues. In this literature review, I address four discourses related to multiracial issues: the social construction of race, hybridity discourses, multiracial literature and discourses, and social justice and oppression frameworks. However, before describing and defining the discourses, it is important to address the nebulous terrain of definitional terms for mixed raced people.

### **What to Call Us?**

The federal government defines five racial categories: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the government recognizes one ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino. To use the term “mixed race” to describe my project would technically have excluded Latino/as. Latino/a is not considered a race by government delineation. In my desire to include Latinas, I have been drawn to the term “mixed heritage;” however mixed heritage could include people with two European heritages and I am not interested in including that population in this project. Latinos often view themselves, and are treated as, peoples from a distinct racial category, as such I include Latino/as who are mixed white under the term “mixed race.” Although I am interested in the experiences of all mixed race people who have some race/ethnicity “of color,” for this project I narrowed my participants to individuals who have one parent who is white and parent who is a person of color.

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<sup>1</sup> According to U.S. Office of Management and Budget Directive 15 (1997)

There is no specific term to identify mixed people who are mixed specifically with heritages that are white and “of color.” However, there are a multitude of terms to refer to people who have parents of different races/ethnicities including biracial, multiracial, interracial, mixed race, mixed, mixed parentage, mixed heritage, mestiza, métis, and multiethnic (see Root, 1996; Parker & Song, 2001; and Downing, Nichols, & Webster, 2005). There are a variety of arguments as to which term is preferred or considered most appropriate.

A Canadian author who interviewed thirty-five “multiethnic” women in Toronto, Canada argued that she uses the term “multiethnic” because race is socially constructed and therefore using the term “mixed race” feels problematic (Mahtani, 2001, p. 173). Furthermore, she found that her participants often felt more comfortable identifying themselves ethnically rather than racially; ethnic identification, she stated, allows for more complexity, especially for those who embody more than two ethnicities.

Mestizo/a refers to people of Indian, Spanish, and sometimes black ancestry. Root (1996) explains that it now encompasses a “broader meaning, referring to people of Latino and European ancestry” (p. x). It is a term also used by Filipinos, because of the shared Spanish ancestry, to refer to mixed Filipinos (Root, 1996, p. x). It is a Spanish-origin word that, when referencing people, is almost exclusively used to refer to people who are part Latino/a or Filipino. The term is also now used to refer to theory, for example in the idea of a mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Many British authors place any terms that include the word “race” in quotation marks, such as the term “mixed race” or “multiracial” (see Parker & Song, 2001; Ifekwunigwe, 2004). The quotation symbol is used to acknowledge and emphasize that



race is a social construct (this will be addressed in detail in the next section). One prominent British author of mixed race issues, Jayne Ifekwunigwe (2001), initially invoked the French term *métis* which she explained is “synonymous with the derogatory English ‘half-caste’ and ‘half-breed’” to circumvent the issue of which existing term to use ( p. 43). She argued that her goal in “redeploying” the term in the English context was to de-center race. However, upon reflection she changed her mind and decided not to employ the term in the English context for fear that using a French-African term in that way could further marginalize mixed race subjectivities (p. 44). She has now returned to using the term “mixed race” in quotes.

Maria P.P. Root wrote two prominent edited volumes about mixed race people incorporating articles by authors writing from a variety of academic disciplines – sociology, psychology, cross, cultural studies, etc. The first book is titled *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992). She does not explain her choice of the term “mixed race” but notes that within the book the terms biracial and multiracial are used interchangeably. The second edited book is titled *The Multiracial Experience* (1997). In the introduction, she makes no mention as to why she switched terms from “mixed race” to “multiracial.” However, she opens the book with a glossary of terms used to refer to “racial mixing” which includes definitions of the terms *biracial* and *multiracial*, among several others, such as *Amerasian*, *Mestiza(o)*, and *Mullatta*, but she does not include a definition of *mixed race*.

Downing, Nichols, & Webster (2005) who wrote *Multiracial America: A Resource Guide on the History and Literature of Interracial Issues* in an effort to help readers best find resources on “interracial themes” provide an overview of language

related to multiracial people and issues. They remind us that “meanings of words change over time” and recommend that people hoping to find information use broad terms such as “interracial” for keyword searching (p. 9). Interracial, they argue is used synonymously with the term multiracial. However, it can also refer to an interaction between members of different races. Their definitions for the terms “racially mixed” and “multiracial” are similar although they add that multiracial often refers to a “family belonging to more than one race” (p. 216). Thus it is not always used to refer to a mixture of races within one person.

The wide range of possible terms and the multitude of potential arguments for the preference of any one term demonstrate that we have yet to find terminology that adequately describes and defines us. Each term has benefits and drawbacks. Downing, Nichols, & Webster (2005) define biracial as “people who are born of parents of two different ‘races’” (p. 212). That definition would appear to mark biracial as the most appropriate term to use in reference to my participants. However, some participants acknowledge that they have more than two races in their heritage. I have decided to predominately use the term mixed race in my work. As other authors have noted, I do not see much difference between that term and multiracial and will use that term, as well as biracial interchangeably with mixed race at times.

### **Race and Gender as Social Constructs**

Race is a social construct (Omi & Winant, 1994). Although the concept of race was originally based on the notion of biology, it is now commonly accepted that race is socially constructed (Omi & Winant, 1994; Olumide, 2002; Furedi, 2001; Spickard, 1992). However, although race may not be defined biologically, and thus is not an

essential construct, the implications of race continue. “Throughout American history, the U.S. government has used racial designations as a tool of dominance, serving to separate and penalize those not defined as white” (Williams, 2006, p. 22). Omi and Winant (1994) argue that race, as with gender, is one of the first observations noted in meeting a person. They assert that without a racial designation one is left without a complete identity because race identity is so integral to U.S. society. Thus, although race is not “real,” racism and its consequences are real in the everyday lives of people. While it is problematic to utilize the term “mixed race” because it has the potential to reify racial categorization, it is also important to recognize that racial categorization continues to define people. Like various “minority” monoracial groups who have been the targets of racist attacks, verbal and physical, many mixed raced people have also experienced racism.

Mixed race people sometimes experience racism when being identified with one racial group. For example, a biracial Black/white person, may experience racism for being recognized as Black. However, there are also a variety of derogatory terms that have been used to refer specifically to mixed race people including “mulatto,” “octoroon,” “half-breed,” and “half-caste” (Mengel, 2001). Multiracial people have been represented as confused, fragmented, or even as traitors to a race (see Young, 1995; Williams, 2006; Root, 1992). It is important to continually question the use of racial categories, including the category “mixed race,” as a reminder that race is socially constructed. However, because race is real in its consequences, we have yet to escape racial designations and thus there is validity in using race-based terms.

Like race, gender is also socially constructed (Butler, 1993, 1999; Lorber 2001). Judith Butler examines the relationship between the materiality of the body and the performativity of identity, particularly gender identification. She states that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (1999, p. 179). She argues that gender and sex are performative and culturally constructed. Just as race is often assigned through phenotype and particular marking characteristics, such as skin color, gender is often assigned on the basis of a sex category that is primarily determined by the genitalia that people have at birth. However, "a sex category becomes a gender status through naming, dress, and the use of other gender markers" (Lorber, 2001, p. 40). Long before puberty, children are named in a variety of ways as occupying the gender of either a boy or a girl. Gender thus becomes a social institution that serves as "one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives" (Lorber, p. 41). This is evidenced through the social division of labor and marriage. Although gender may be socially constructed, "once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations" (p. 48). Thus, although gender is socially constructed, because it is a major organizing institution, we must acknowledge that there are groups of people categorized as men and others categorized as women.

That gender is a driving force in defining the human experience is one of the reasons which I have chosen to exclusively include women in my study. Although much can be gained from learning about the experience of mixed race men, I found it useful to focus this project on *women* of mixed heritage. Due to the power inequities between men and women, and my desire to incorporate focus groups, I felt that concentrating this study

on women would allow for greater freedom of expression among the participants. Furthermore, historically there have been distinct implications for race mixing among men and women; this will be further discussed in the sections on multiracial discourses and hybridity. This is because oppression is sustained by an interlocking matrix of domination created through race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other social categories (Collins, 1990).

### **Hybridity Discourses**

Hybridity is currently a popular concept in a variety of contemporary academic discourses. Discussions of hybridity can be found in several fields including sociology, women's studies, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and education. These discourses directly and indirectly speak to multiracial experiences and the social construction of race, however they are largely theoretically abstract, neglecting the embodied experiences of mixed-race people.

#### *History of the term "Hybridity"*

The term hybridity stems from biology and the selective interbreeding of plants. However, in the mid 1800s the term was used to refer to humans and became associated with the eugenics movement (Young, 1995). White colonialists wanted to promote the idea that human beings were of different species to justify slavery and exploitation of people of color. At this time, mixed-race women were scrutinized in the effort to show that as a different species, mixed-race women were infertile. When this argument was not shown as viable, prejudiced scientists developed arguments about different "types" of people (Young, 1995). For example, in *The Races of Men* (1850) Knox argued that "the

hybrid was a degradation of humanity and was rejected by nature” (quoted in Young, p. 15).

The term hybridity has always been entwined in racial debates and often carries a history of racist politics (Young, 1995). The hybrid signaled the potential demise of the “great white race.” “Hybrids” simultaneously offered hope to people of color, because the hybrid existence, and specifically the fertility of the hybrid woman, proved that people of color were indeed people and not another species that could be exploited at will. At the same time, some mixed-race children were daily reminders for women of color of sexual assault they had endured.

#### *The New Conception of Hybridity*

The new postcolonial concept of hybridity is in many ways removed from its biological origins and placed instead into a theoretical *space* of culture. Bhabha is the most prominent writer linked with the recent reconceptualization of the term hybridity. He stresses the interdependence of hybrid parts (e.g., the colonizer and the colonized) and challenges the assumption that cross cultural encounters will automatically be regulated by a dominator/dominated relationship. Instead, such encounters create what Bhabha (1996) describes as “the Third Space.” This hybrid space, Bhabha argues, breaks down binary categories and enables a form of subversion by the colonized of the colonizer. In this in-between, hybrid, “Third Space,” a new space of negotiation emerges where “power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal” (Bhabha, p. 58, 1996); in other words, the colonized may claim power in this space through discourse. Bhabha argues that this hybrid space is one of empowerment for the colonized agent. However, this “Third Space” theory is often articulated by voices that represent the dominant culture,

namely male academics, and the voices of the subaltern – people who represent oppressed, minority groups, including mixed race women - are marginalized (see, for example, McLaren, 1997 & Grossberg, 1993).

Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2003) promote Bhabha's notion that the hybridity of the postcolonial subject is a source of strength. They define hybridity as "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" (p. 118). This is a zone in which hybridity combines the colonizer and colonized worlds. Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin do acknowledge, however, that the term "hybridity" has often been used in post-colonial discourse to mean simply "cross-cultural exchange." They point out the danger in doing so; it can lead to "negating and neglecting the imbalance and inequality of the power relations it references" (p. 119).

Young (1995), in contrast to Bhabha, argues that the theories advanced today about post-colonialism and ethnicity continue to promote the colonial discourse of the nineteenth century rather than dismantle it. He argues that the current celebration of hybridity is an extension of the nineteenth century fascination with people having sex and feeds into the pseudo-scientific cultural construction of race. Hybridity in its new form conveniently forgets colonialism's sordid history of interbreeding through rape. Although there are conflicting views on the new concept of hybridity and its potential to break down the colonizer/colonized binary, it is clear that the term "hybridity" has taken up new space and meaning in what is termed "post-colonial dialogue."

Despite the newfound attention to hybridity in post-colonial discourses, Stam (1998) reminds us that "hybridity has been a perennial feature of art and cultural discourse in Latin America -- highlighted in such terms as *mestizaje*, *indigenismo*,

*diversalite, creolite, raza cósmica*” (p. 2). He argues that the term and concept of hybridity have recently been “recoded” by the postmodern, postcolonial, and post-nationalist movement. Hybridity, Stam states, has existed and been discussed for centuries and has always been “deeply entangled with colonial violence” (p. 2). This reconceptualization is power-laden, asymmetrical, and co-optable. This newly redefined hybridity term,

fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, such as colonial imposition (for example, the Catholic Church constructed on top of a destroyed Inca temple), or other interactions such as obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry, commercial exploitation, top-down appropriation, bottom-up subversion (Stam, p. 3).

In other words, not only has the concept “hybrid” been co-opted from terms and concepts related to signifiers of “race-mixing” but it has been so broadly defined that it fails to define anything and simultaneously succeeds in making the power relations involved in colonizer/colonized positionality once again invisible.

#### *The New Hybridity and Mixed-Race Women*

Contemporary cultural studies writers such as Grossberg (1993) and McLaren (1997) take up the postcolonial concept of the hybrid *space* and splice it with the writing of Women’s/Chicana Studies scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. In her groundbreaking book, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1987) writes about how mixed people inhabit a *mestiza consciousness*. Although there are resemblances between Anzaldúa’s ideology and the postcolonial concept of hybridity, there are differences. The fundamental difference is that at the heart of her writing she is speaking literally about the *experience* of “una nueva raza” (a new race) of mestizo/as. Unlike cultural studies authors, Anzaldúa’s conception of the borderlands, both literal and theoretical, includes mixed-



race *people*. She argues that *mestizas* feel a “psychic restlessness” as they are “caught” in the “battleground” of racial debates.

Yet the postcolonial concept of hybridity often overlooks the experience of the literal “hybrid,” and instead often focuses on the theoretical construct of crossing borders (Bhabha, 1996; Grossberg, 1993; McLaren 1997). McLaren (1997), for example, in his chapter “The Ethnographer as Postmodern *Flâneur*: Critical Reflexivity and Posthybridity as Narrative Engagement” discusses hybridity and *mestizaje*. At the beginning of the chapter, McLaren states that the *flâneur* “or dandy whose aim is to be aimless ... must negotiate the everyday scene of postmodern hybridity” (p. 149). In the next sentence he indicates that hybridity is comprised of “intercultural social relations within frenetic narratives” (p. 149). Throughout the chapter, McLaren utilizes the terms “hybridity” and “hybrid” to refer to various types of mixing, as in the example above in which he describes hybridity as intercultural relational mixing; he also refers to “hybridized spheres” as those that mix together both public and private spheres (p. 150). McLaren also discusses the concept of “*mestizaje*.” In a sentence he aligns his concept of *mestizaje* with that of Anzaldúa stating, “*mestizaje* identity as articulated by McLaren, Anzaldúa, and others refers to a counter narrative that builds community within the margins of culture” (p. 156). *Mestizaje* in his conception is created through discourse; it is not the lived experience of mixed people. The experience of the “hybrid” or *mestiza* is removed and even he, as a postmodern *flâneur*, can assume, “a narrative identity built upon cultural hybridity in a world undergoing a process of structural hybridity on a global basis” (p. 163). Hybrid existence is co-opted and romanticized as primarily a site of critical reflexivity.

Grossberg (1993) uses hybridity to “describe three different images of border existences” (p. 91). The first is the image of a “third space,” as defined by Bhabha and described earlier. The second is the image of “liminality” in which refers to how the subaltern lives on the border (p. 91). The third is “border-crossing” which marks an image of “between-ness” created by mobility. Grossberg argues that “these three versions of hybridity are conflated in various ways, as in Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987:37) description of the Atzlan” (p. 92). Thus Grossberg undermines mestiza’s literal lived experiences of liminality by claiming that concepts are being conflated, rather than acknowledging that it is the actual mestiza, the living and breathing woman, who inhabits mestiza consciousness or the “third space.” The hybrid positionalities of third space, liminality, and border crossing are open to everyone and once again the mestiza herself is rendered invisible while her theoretical consciousness is co-opted. These new conceptions of hybridity are also problematic because they overlook the historical violence related to race mixing as well as the embodied experience of mixed race people living today.

In the original conception of hybridity, hybrids were literal people who were posed as *both* the ultimate threat to dominant power *and* hope for the colonized to be treated as (equal) human beings. This debate about mixed-race people continues today in the United States; the arguments have changed but interracial people continue to stand for a possibility of hope for some and demise for others. Women, with the ability to get pregnant, often sit at the heart of this debate.

Today, people of mixed heritage are often hailed as the answer to the racial divides. For example, Trueba (2004) argues that as interracial marriages increase and

racial differences become increasingly blurred, racial conflict will decrease.

Alternatively, some conservatives cite people of mixed heritage as proof that reparations for racial injustice, such as affirmative action programs, are no longer needed (Williams, 2006). At the same time, both white people and people of color have made arguments that mixed-race people will be the demise of cultural preservation (see Williams, 2006 and white supremacist websites). Racist whites argue that race mixing should not occur, naming miscegenation as the ultimate sin. Some people of color, after being subjected to years of assimilation and cultural genocide, also view mixed-race people as a threat to cultural preservation and argue against interracial coupling.

Discourses on hybridity and race mixing are used in a variety of ways: to end racism (as in Trueba's 2004 argument that mixed race people will decrease racial conflict), to promote social justice (as seen in the work described later by Maria P.P. Root, 1992 & 1997), and to promote critical theory (as used, for example, by McLaren when he states that "I have tried in a modest way to advance a critical pedagogy of whiteness that will serve a form of postcolonial hybridity," 2000, p. 150). Yet all these approaches largely ignore the experiences of the women who embody this debate.

### **Multiracial Discourses**

Although there is a growing body of work related to multiracial identities, the amount of writing on this topic is still relatively minimal. When I first began exploring this topic in 1990, there were virtually no academic books written by or for mixed raced people, with the exception of *Borderlands* by Anzaldúa written in 1987 (which has now gained recognition as an academic text but at that time was not considered as such). Although there were some personal narratives written by and about mixed race people

(Moraga, 1983; Creef, 1990), the first academic book dedicated specifically to that subject, *Racially Mixed People in America*, by Maria P.P. Root did not appear until 1992. This text included a compilation of essays, some written by mixed race people, incorporating a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and social work. Root (1992) explained that there were several factors that silenced multiracial voices, including isolation of interracial families, forced monoracial identification by the government within only one racial category, and the then “recent pride in being a person of color” that “demanded full-fledged commitment to the racial and ethnic minority group in order to pass ‘legitimacy tests’” (p. 8). Root argued that the “biracial baby boom” which started around 1967 after anti-miscegenation laws were repealed, forced people to acknowledge the multiracial experience. Additionally, she asserted that, “The topic of racially mixed people provides us with a vehicle for examining ideologies surrounding race, race relations, and the role of the social sciences in the deconstruction of race” (p. 10). The book offered a comprehensive look at the experience of multiracial people through both sociological and psychological lenses. The book included essays on constructions of race and identity formation, historical information related to multiracial people, identity development models for mixed race youth, and thoughts about how increased acceptance and visibility of mixed race people might change society. The tenor of the book was a celebration of mixed race people; it included arguments for why people should claim mixed race identities and why mixed races voices and experiences matter in understanding race relations discourse. For example, Nash (1992), one of the authors in the book, argued that, “Multicultural people have a special role to play in combating stereotypes” and that “Those of us with two distinct ‘racial’ backgrounds are a visual

reminder that *everyone* is multicultural and deserves to be treated as a multifaceted individual” (p. 330). Thus, in Nash’s conception, multiracial individuals provide hope that racial divides will decrease. A biracial, bicultural identity development model is also included in this book. In this model, the ultimate stage of identity involves the assertion of an interracial identity (Kich, 1992, pp. 314-317). Although perhaps celebratory at the cost of minimizing the complexity of mixed race experiences, *Racially Mixed People in America* was a well-developed, comprehensive, and much needed edited text in the time period it was published.

In 1997, Root edited a second book of essays about *The Multiracial Experience*. In the introduction, Root, referencing the authors within the book, argued that there are four types of border crossings negotiated by multiracial people. One negotiation includes “having *both* feet in *both* groups” (p. xxi). Root asserted that “this new construction suggests the ability to hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously” (p. xxi). A second border crossing occurs when “the individual decodes their ambiguity to the perceiver or matches the demands of the social context” as he or she crosses between distinct racial and ethnic social contexts (p. xxi). A third negotiation entails remaining on the border and “experiencing it as the central reference point” (p. xxi). People taking this stance may “insist upon viewing themselves with a multiracial label that cannot be deconstructed” (p. xxi). In the last border crossing “one creates a home in one ‘camp’ for an extended period of time and makes forays into other camps from time to time” (p. xxii). From this perspective, self identifications may change over a lifetime. Root, in describing these border crossings, emphasizes that “loyalty is not the issue” it is rather a “natural response” of self-preservation in a complex environment (pp. xxii & xxi). The

essays provided an in-depth look at the impact of mixed race people and multiracial discourses in relation to identity formation, other social categories such as gender, and multicultural education. This edited collection was more critical and politicized than the first volume; however, several of the writings continued to highlight the positives of multiracial people and identification.

There are now several texts dedicated to the topic of multiraciality. These texts cover a variety of disciplines and genres. There is a growing number of narratives by and/or about the mixed race experience (for a description of many autobiographical writings on being mixed race see Spickard, 2001; Downing, Nichols, & Webster, 2005). In addition, there are texts and essays dedicated to viewpoints and laws on interracial marriages and families (McRoy & Iijima Hall, 1996; Dalmage, 2000; Wallenstein, 2002), books that look specifically at the experience of racial identity formation among black/white biracial youth and adults (Tizard, 2002; Korgen, 1998), and writings that examine the social construction of race as it relates to mixed race identity (Spickard, 1992; Fernandez, 1996; and Olumide, 2002).

Since the two edited collections of academic writings by Root, there have been two other edited collections published that mark “mixed race” issues as a legitimate field of ethnic studies and sociological inquiry: *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* (2001) and *‘Mixed Race’ Studies: A Reader* (2004). Both of these books are edited by British authors and include writings by academics who are from both Great Britain and United States.

Parker and Song published *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* in 2001. They acknowledge that mixed race people and the topic of mixed race can elicit hatred, fear, and resentment, as expressed, for example, on white supremacist websites. However, simultaneously

“proponents of interracial love can express a naïve celebration of ‘mixed race’ relationships and children as ‘living proof’ of the transcendence of racism and the ultimate expression of multicultural harmony” (p. 1). The editors propose that their goal is to avoid such extreme positions and “think critically about ‘mixed race’ in a variety of settings, through a variety of methodologies and perspectives” (p. 1). Indeed the writings cover a variety of topics including: the intersection of eugenics and mixed race people (Furedi, 2001), the distinctiveness of mixed race experiences based on race and place (Ifekwunigwe, 2001), the importance of questioning who is included and excluded in mixed race discourse to move beyond the black/white binary (Mahtani & Moreno, 2001), the need to question the impact of mixed race debates on representation on larger politics of representation (Owens, 2001), and the interplay between racialization and physical characteristics (Mahtani, 2001). The writings incorporate sociological, theoretical, empirical, and personal methodologies and perspectives.

In 2004, Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe published a *‘Mixed Race’ Studies* reader. The reader incorporates scholarship from the social sciences, biological sciences, and the humanities. The author argues that, “‘Mixed Race’ Studies is one of the fastest growing, as well as one of the most important and controversial areas in the field of ‘race’ and ethnic relations” (p. 1). Ifekwunigwe’s carefully crafted anthology provides an insightful overview of the history of ‘mixed race’ through three main themes: 1) the origins of views of miscegenation as pathological, 2) contemporary discourses that celebrate mixed race people and mixed race as a social category, and 3) the debates about “the politics, policies, practices and paradigms of ‘multiraciality’ and their critiques” (p. 18). The book includes writings of previously published scholarship by U.S., British, and

Canadian authors. The selections highlight tensions in multiracial discourse about issues related to racial categorization, the impacts of miscegenation, and views on multiracial identity and politics. Authors in this collection challenge readers to understand the U.S. history of anti-miscegenation sentiment, to rethink the justifications for racial categories and the implications of the social construction of race, and to critically think about mixed race issues in relation to current political debates.

In 2005, Downing, Nichols, and Webster published *Multiracial America*, “a resource guide on the history and literature of interracial issues” (p.1). The book is written to address growing interest in multiracial people and interracial relationships and is written for those who may be interested in learning and teaching about the topic. The authors provide a comprehensive overview of resources related to multiracial issues including journal articles, magazine articles, autobiographical narratives, fictional texts, children’s books, films, and academic texts. It is an invaluable resource for those who are interested in scholarship on mixed race studies. The resources are plentiful, but based upon their thorough review of the literature, it is apparent that there are still relatively few academic articles and books written on the topic of mixed race.

These burgeoning academic texts mark multiracial experiences as an emerging field of legitimate, and necessary, scholarship related to issues of race. They also demonstrate the growing complexity of mixed race issues. Earlier writings on the mixed race experience (see Root, 1992 and Root, 1996) written, to some extent, by and for mixed raced people, concentrated on naming the rights of mixed race people and asserted that multiracial individuals can and do live healthy lives. Historically mixed race people were labeled as degenerate and developmentally inferior (Knox, 1850; Nott & Gliddon,



1854; Young, 1995). Root's texts served to normalize and name the multiracial experience. Although there are critical pieces that examine mixed race in relationship to larger political issues, the prominent message might be encapsulated as, "we can identify ourselves however we want and that is okay" as evidenced by the opening bill of rights in the second anthology (1997, p. 7). Although as a mixed race woman, I appreciate this, as an educator working to promote social justice I am invested in understanding the political implications of certain individual choices. The celebratory tone of Root's texts was perhaps necessary at the time to combat years of historical pathologizing of mixed race people. They mark an important part of the path that has led to the continued enunciations of the mixed race experience as can be seen in the subsequent anthologies.

In addition to increased writings on the mixed race experience, there has been an active multiracial movement that has been growing over the past ten years. In 1996, Brown and Douglas (1997) documented the six largest multiracial organizations: I-Pride in San Francisco; The Biracial Family Network in Chicago; The Interracial Family Circle in Washington, DC; Multiracial Americans of Southern California; PROJECT RACE, in Roswell, Georgia; and AMEA in Berkeley. They found that that only two of the organizations (I-Pride and AMEA) were founded by multiracial people; those two were organized to respond to the needs of mixed raced people. The other four groups were primarily founded by white women who were creating spaces to deal with racism they encountered as a result of being in interracial marriages. Mengel (2001) labels the distinctness of these groups as *interracial* – "groups initiated by White people romantically involved in interracial relationships" and *multiracial* – "groups initiated by mixed race people" (p. 104). Mengel notes that often these organizations are sought out

by reporters and researchers in search of the voices of mixed race people; however, because most of the organizations are led by white parents, the direct voices of mixed race people are absent. He argues that “the parents of the mixed race individual, unless multiracial themselves, simply cannot be the authorities through which this shared history can be passed” (p. 107).

Discussions and examinations of multiracial movements have continued in the recently published book *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America* in which Kim Williams (2006) traces the history of multiracial movements and examines their intersectionality with civil rights. She charts dozens of multiracial organizations across the United States. Williams was interested specifically in the connections between multiracial organizations and policy outcomes; she found that few organizations had any bearing on these outcomes. However, there were about twenty multiracial movement leaders who pushed for a multiracial category on the 2000 U.S. census (p. 15). Like Brown and Douglas (1997), Williams found that “middle-class, suburban, interracial married white women tend to serve as the public face of local multiracial advocacy” (p. 82). Through her research and among these leaders she also found, “a thematic if ill-defined assertion that interracial love and the acknowledgement of multiracial people could, if recognized, help American society moved beyond an impasse ... of racial polarization” (p. 102). Thus her findings coincide with the celebratory aspect of mixed race history as noted in the edited books by Root (1992, 1997) and Ifekwunigwe (2004).

Williams work is especially powerful because it lays out the history of the multiracial movement and articulates it in relationship to civil rights ideals and legislation. In addition to exposing the uncritical celebration of mixed people as the

saviors of racial divides, she explained that African-Americans concerned with civil rights viewed the multiracial movement and multiracial people who insist on multiracial identities with suspicion and concern. Williams quotes Jesse Jackson as naming the multiracial movement as “a diversion, designed to undercut affirmative action” (p. 102). Williams’ work recognizes black elites’ fears that the opportunity to mark a multiracial identity might lead to a “mass desertion from black identification” (p. 114). She simultaneously acknowledges the time in United States history when mixed race people were considered to be inferior human beings by white supremacists (p. 23). Williams pinpoints the multiple sides of the mixed race debates in which mixed race people are caught (and participate). In one corner, there are the acritical, naïve proponents of interracial love that argue that mixed people are the cure for racism and racial divisions. In another corner, there are civil rights activists who fear that people who identify as multiracial will lead to the demise of affirmative action and other hard won civil rights for African-Americans. In yet another corner are racist whites who argue that mixed race people (especially those who are part white) are leading to the demise of the country. Her work highlights the contentious political debates around mixed race people. In relation to the politics of including categories for multiracial people on the census, she succinctly states: “Think of it this way: Democrats wanted multiracial recognition *without* adverse civil rights consequences; Republicans wanted multiracial recognition *with* adverse civil rights consequences” (p. 21).

The multiracial discourse is still limited but rapidly growing. Although there are an increasing number of academic books (Root, 1992, 1997; Parker & Song, 2001; Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Downing, Nichols, & Webster, 2005) and novels and anthologies

with personal narratives by mixed race people (Camper, 1994; O'Hearn, 1998; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Walker, 2001), there are few ethnographic studies examining the experiences of mixed race people. Many ethnographies of mixed race people concentrate on multiracial identity development and take a psychological perspective (Funderburg, 1994; Brown, 1995; Collins, 2000; Gillem, Cohn, & Throne, 2001; Kich, 1992; Standen, 1996). A common theme among them is that mixed race people identify in different ways – with one ethnic/racial group or with both – and some change identifications over time and/or within different situations. There are few ethnographies that move beyond identity development to examine interviews with mixed race people within a larger sociological perspective (Korgen, 1998; Ifekwunigwe, 1999).

In her book *From Black to Biracial: Transforming Racial Identity Among Americans*, Kathleen Odell Korgen (1998) describes her interviews with forty adults who have one white parent and one African American parent. She approached her research through a sociological lens of symbolic interactionism and postmodern theory. In her book, she highlights three participants born before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement through case studies. Korgen argues that there has been an historical transformation in how biracial persons identify themselves. She found that two-thirds of her participants over thirty self-identified as exclusively black, while less than one-third under thirty identified racially as black. She explained, “while it is increasingly accepted for black-white persons to claim both their black and white heritage, the possibility of being simply white is still not socially sanctioned” (p. 53). She found that most of her younger participants identified as biracial. She argues that, “the dialectic between society and identity continues. As society becomes globalized and the economy shifts, person’s

identities adjust by becoming more fluid” (p. 95). This fluidity, as evidenced among the transformation of identity among biracial Americans “reveals the fluidity and subjectivity of race” (p. 118).

Jayne Ifekwunigwe’s (1999) *Scattered Belongings*, is also ethnographic, based on a two-year Bristol, England-based project that involved twenty-five mixed race participants representing the white-English and English-African diaspora. It is in this book that she coined the term *métis* as described earlier in this chapter. Ifekwunigwe argued that,

The situational positioning of global *bi-racialized and multiracialized métis* subjectivities, of which *métissage* is derivative, are circumscribed and delimited within particular ever-changing *local* geopolitical and sociohistorical milieux within which hierarchical and frequently gendered power relations are centralized. (p. 21)

The testimonies she gathered “illustrate the ways in which, acting *métis(se)* subjects can and do negotiate, challenge and subvert all of the subject positions – ‘One’ (White) the ‘Other’ (Black) or ‘Neither’ (*métis(se)*)” (p. 21). She highlights six women’s testimonies and illuminates “painful psychosocial consequences for *métisse* women whose lived reality defy the false one drop rule” (Ifekwunigwe, 2004, p. 184). All the women have White English, German or Irish mothers and Black fathers. They also had “other Black continental, African, African Caribbean or African American safety nets” (p. 186) – surrogate sisters and other-mothers. Ifekwunigwe argued that “Additive Blackness” can be a survival strategy for *métis(se)* people who are “unwilling or unable to sever ties with their White British or White European origins” (1999, p. 183). Ifekwunigwe maintained that “embracing an exclusive Black identity – as a political strategy – is counterproductive ... [because] Black identity masks the many differences that exist

across cultures, nations, ethnicities, religions, gender, regions, and generations” (2004, p. 190). Ultimately Ifekwunigwe is arguing for an understanding of multiple subjectivities that interrogates “taken-for-granted constructs of ‘race,’ nation, culture and family and their confluent relationships to gendered identities” (2004, p. 193).

There are two other notable writings based on ethnographic work that do not take a multiracial identity development perspective on the narratives. Mahtani (2001) interviewed thirty-five multiethnic women in Toronto, Canada and describes the women’s varied senses of belonging. She used the work of feminist geographer Gillian Rose on “paradoxical space” and Elspeth Proben’s writing about examining how people forge belongings in everyday local embodied practices to frame the experiences of her participants’ multiethnicities. She reported that many of the women in her study “explained that their ability to cross over demarcations in racial divides made it easier to transcend other social cleavages” (p. 185). Mahtani found that her participants claimed to occupy both center and marginalized spaces and “some even likened their multiethnic status to an ability to understand marginality” (p. 187). She argued that multiethnic people can experience their mixedness in paradoxical yet positive ways.

In 2004, Kristen Renn added to the sparse qualitative work on mixed race identity with the publication of her book *Mixed Race Students in College: The Ecology of Race, Identity, and Community on Campus*. Her work uses an ecology model to examine how peer culture shapes identity in various spaces. Renn documents five patterns of racial identity claims among mixed race college students based on individual interviews, focus groups (with select participants), and written responses with 56 participants spanning three distinct geographical research sites within predominantly white

institutions: the Northeast, the rural southern Midwest, and the industrial northern Midwest. Renn found a *monoracial identity pattern* among 27 students who identified some or all of the time with only one of their heritages (p. 95). There was also a *multiple monoracial identities pattern* exhibited by 27 of the students. These were students who identified as “both x and y” or “half x and half y” (p. 124). Fifty of the participants claimed a *multiracial identity* – this included a variety of self labels that were nonmonoracial (p. 155). The least common identity pattern was the *extraracial identity* in which participants resisted identifying in U.S. racial categories. Thirty four of the participants fell into what Renn described as the *situational identity pattern* which was comprised of students who consciously or unconsciously publicly identified in more than one of the other four patterns depending on context (p. 219). Renn argued that “Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that, for mixed race students, achieving a singular racial identity outcome is not necessarily reasonable or desirable” (p. 243).

### **Theories of Diversity and Social Justice**

Because mixed race discourses are linked to discussions of race and racism, they have the potential to speak to theories of diversity and social justice. There are an enormous amount of theories related to social justice. For the purposes of this project, I will highlight just a few of these. As defined in the Williams book (2006) described earlier, there are social justice frameworks that concentrate on the history of civil rights and focus on legislation, such as affirmative action, that can help promote equity between people of color and white people. Within this framework, as it related to the debate over the inclusion of a multiracial category on the US 2000 census, civil rights groups “feared that a multiracial category would dilute the count of minority populations” (p. 5).

Williams asks critical questions such as, “Is someone who marks white and a minority race on a form eligible for the same programs and protections as someone who identifies only as a member of a minority group?” (p. 116). She concludes that “multiracialism is not necessarily a civil rights setback” and that “civil rights institutions must contend with racial mixture now and in the future” (p. 120). She finds “multiracialism” to be on the border of civil rights debates and states that, “While multiracialism may be but a step from the color blindness of the right, at the same time it is not so far from the principled color consciousness of the left either” (p. 121).

Williams (2006) also discusses issues related to civil rights in relation to segregation and schooling. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legalized segregation in a ruling that allowed for “separate but equal” spaces and services. The *Plessy* ruling was overturned in 1954 when the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision required desegregation. Williams reminds readers that self-esteem was a “primary rationale” for the Supreme Court decision (p. 103) but it was viewed as a “black” problem. Williams also quotes Guinier (2004) who contends that the decision positioned the “peculiarly American race ‘problem’ as a psychological and interpersonal challenge rather than a structural problem rooted in our economic and political system” (p. 104). Williams found a general belief by the white women in her study that “love will somehow conquer all” and eliminate racism. The continuing segregation in education fifty years after the *Brown* decision, Williams contends, serves as proof that theories of racism must include an analysis of racial and class privilege. In a revealing move, Williams then positions her work and findings in relationship to Derrick Bell’s interest-convergence principle. Bell’s formula holds that “The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be



accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Williams, p. 104). Williams then asks, “What are we to make of this idea in a multiracial context?” (p. 104).

Lisa Delpit (1993) defines a related framework to understand racism and social justice as she describes what she terms “the culture of power.” She argues that there is a culture of power that is reflected in the rules of those who have power. “This means that success in institutions – schools, workplaces, and so on – is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power” (p. 25). Delpit contends that people transmit information implicitly to members of their culture. However, “when implicit codes are attempted across culture, communication frequently breaks down” (p. 25). She argues that the debate over how to most skillfully educate black and poor children is not about methodology but “rather in communicating across cultures and in addressing the more fundamental issue of power, of whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of color” (p. 46). Delpit emphasizes the importance of listening and contends that, “it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process” (p. 46). This requires raising questions about discrimination and truly listening to people of color in a way that requires, “open hearts and minds” (p. 46).

Another prominent resource related to social justice education is the book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* by Adams, Bell, & Griffin (1997). The authors view social justice as both a process and a goal. In their conception of social justice, “distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” and “social actors have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole” (p. 3). The

authors find political value in identifying characteristics and patterns of oppression (p. 5). They believe that, “eradicating oppression ultimately requires struggle against all its forms, and that building coalitions among diverse people offers the most promising strategies for challenging oppression systematically” (p. 6). The book provides curriculum designs to address racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and classism. Each model is based on the premise that “each form of oppression has agent and target social groups” (p. 73). Similar to Delpit’s conception of the “culture of power” they argue that “there is a group of people with greater access to social power and privilege based upon their membership in their social group” (p. 73). In their breakdown of agent and target groups related to racism, whites form the agent group and “Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and Biracial People” are listed under target groups.

## **Conclusion**

The multitude of terms used to describe mixed race people, and the arguments over what they mean, demonstrate that we have yet to find ways to adequately and exclusively define people who are mixed with one white parent and one parent who is a person of color. I am somewhat drawn to the term biracial, but I hesitate because some of the women acknowledge that their ancestry includes more than two races, even if somewhat removed. Part of what adds to the complexity of this naming process is that race is socially constructed. Yet, by defining mixed race we are reifying race yet again. British authors acknowledge this by placing the term “mixed race” in quotation marks. I appreciate that strategic move to acknowledge racial constructivism. I contemplated placing quotes around race-based terms in my work, but because that strategy is only evident in publications by British authors, I did not want to send an inadvertent message

to readers that this study may be based in Britain. However, although I do not place racial terms in quotes, I philosophically argue, along with a myriad of other researchers that race is a social construction. Nonetheless, the effects of race are real. Gender is also performative and culturally constructed (Butler, 1999). However, gender too is a major organizing feature of our society and its construction carries particular consequences.

I locate this work within and in response to the post colonial concept of hybridity. I have had strong visceral reactions to the work of some authors that theorize about “hybrid spaces” and “hybrid encounters” as places of possibility in ways so far removed from the historical origins of hybridity that the embodied experience of hybrids, of multiracial people, is omitted. It feels like a colonizing move in which the experiences of mixed race people are erased and replaced by academic theoretical conceptions. This project is, in part, a move to re-centralize voices of mixed race women who can speak directly to hybridity from an embodied experience. These women live a hybrid experience. Their voices add to Gloria Anzaldúa’s work on *mestiza consciousness* and complicate theoretical conceptions of hybridity that omit the experiences of “hybrids.”

This work also contributes to multiracial discourses. There is relatively little work written about multiracial experiences. Racial mixing has been a topic of contention since the colonization of the United States and there have since been several legal and social scientific writings that attempted to halt interracial mixing and place parameters around the agency of multiracial people. However, it is only in the past three decades that there has been a significant number of writings that speak not only about mixed race experiences but also speak to, with, and from mixed race people. Ifekwunigwe (2004) argues that it is really only in the last decade that many writings have taken a politically

critical approach to multiracial paradigms. This work adds to the critical literature on the topic of multiraciality.

Although the number of academic writings on mixed race experiences is growing there are still very few qualitative research projects that have been conducted with mixed race people. Many qualitative researchers have taken a psychological approach to their work with mixed race people placing their findings within a framework that highlights identity formation. In addition, many studies have focused specifically on the experiences of multiracial people who share the same racial backgrounds, for example projects that include the experiences of only black/white biracial people or only Korean/white biracial people.

This work helps fill two gaps. First, it examines the relationship of mixed race experiences that cut across racial lines by including women of Asian, black/African-American, and Latina backgrounds. Second, it moves beyond identity formation theories to consider broader relationships to structure and agency. In addition, this work is theorized in relationship to social justice frameworks with explicit attention to how these women's stories might contribute to our understandings of the operations of social justice and equity, particularly in relationship to the complex issues of racial privilege and oppression.

## **Identity Formation: Floating Around In the Borderlands**

*“I think educators need to understand, among many other things about racial identity, that no matter the age of the person or what they seem like, it’s not necessarily something that everyone has come to accept to understand about themselves. It is always changing, it is not something that we should assume everyone has dealt with in a way that they feel is finite, in a way that is not going to change.” – Katherine*

Katherine was my first interview in Boston. We planned to meet the afternoon I arrived in the city. My dad who lives 45 minutes outside Boston, excited about my doctoral work, offered to drive me. After dropping off my suitcase at Becky’s house, my committee member who offered her Boston-based home to me while conducting research, we took out the map to find the best route to Harvard where I was to meet Katherine. Due to unexpected traffic (almost an oxymoron when thinking about Boston) we were already running a half an hour late. I called Katherine and she graciously said she would wait for me to arrive; we would meet in front of the CVS drugstore in Harvard Square. Twenty minutes later I arrived, immediately exhilarated by the college crowds milling the streets. I jumped out of the car, quickly thanked and kissed my dad goodbye and stood at the front of the store where Katherine and I were to meet. I looked at everyone around me, wondering of every woman I saw, does she look mixed? Nothing. A few cell phone calls later Katherine and I realized that we were at two different CVS stores in Harvard Square, and she came to rescue me from a morning of perpetually leaning towards what was just out of reach.

Katherine was strikingly beautiful, exactly who one might think of when the image of someone mixed race comes to mind, a combination of features that make you

wonder, what might her background be? I feel trepidation as I write that description because I trouble the notion of essentializing the mixed race “look”. Nonetheless, that was my initial impression of her, and I wondered what her first impression was of me, did/do I also look mixed race? At a fast pace, Katherine led me to the nearby Harvard Ed School Library where we had previously arranged to talk. As we walked, I tried to pay attention to landmarks and street signs while making small talk so that I could later find my way back to the T stop. She walked with the grace of a dancer and as I was trying to make a mental note of the clothes she was wearing, as a good ethnographer does, I tripped while walking up the stairs to the interview room and immediately blushed. *Suave.*

The interview began with ease in the small yet surprisingly modern furnished library study room. We sat across the table from each other, I pulled out my recorders, and the words began to flow. Katherine shared stories of her life. Over the next couple interviews with her and others, I began to recognize themes of how my participants form their racial and ethnic identities.

There are a myriad of ways one could describe identity formation, the main themes that emerged from the women’s stories were: claiming women of color identities, rejecting white identities, and shifts and challenges to identity. This process of identification, both self-identification and external identifications by others, was influenced by language, home culture, relationship to each parent, where we grew up, physical appearance, school, and friends.

It is important to remember that this is a select group of mixed race women. These are women who responded specifically to a call for mixed race women so it makes

sense that most of these women would identify primarily as mixed race rather than with one ethnic group or racial identity. This is also an incredibly educated group. All of the women but one has at least her bachelor's degree. Three were in the process of obtaining graduate degrees and four held advanced degrees. However, there was a fair amount of diversity in terms of where they grew up, their socio economic backgrounds, their current class positions, the jobs they held, physical appearance, their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and sexuality.

### **Self-Positioning through Parents**

When asked, "tell me about who you are" almost all of the women positioned their racial/ethnic identities through their parents. For example, Joanna said, "My mom is black and my dad is white;" Marta said, "My dad is an immigrant from Peru, and he's mestizo; my mother is Ashkenazi white Jewish;" and Ana said, "my mom is white, she's British and my dad is Filipino." There were a few exceptions to this. Mindy said "I'm half Filipino and half white American." In the group interview Alana said "I'm mixed with black and white," but in her individual interview she said, "I was born in 79 in Los Angeles to a black man and white woman." However, beyond simple explanations of racial and ethnic identifications, there were a variety of ways that the women positioned themselves, and were positioned by others, and for several of the women their racial and ethnic self-identifications changed over time and within different contexts.

As we are reminded by Katherine's opening quote, identity formation is a constant process. Many of these women had shifting racial/ethnic identities, and I suspect they will continue to change. In addition, sometimes other social and personal identities took center stage. I began each individual interview with the invitation, "tell

me about yourself.” Knowing that the interviews were about mixed race women, most participants began their responses with their ethnic identities, usually naming themselves through their parents as described above, but often those racial/ethnic descriptions were accompanied by other important identity markers. For example Linda said, “I am a 30-year-old, queer, hapa<sup>2</sup>, gender queer, filmmaker, writer, friend, sister, daughter, San Francisco native.” Maria, often sarcastically witty in her remarks, said, “I’m someone who’s totally in a relationship crisis” (she broke up with her partner of 5 years a few months after the interview). She then quickly gave an analysis of the difficulties associated with answering my question as a mixed race person in relation to racial/ethnic identity. She stated,

So this is always interesting being asked that because, like, who I am always comes around to who my parents are separately and then being both those is who I am. So like there are other people who can say, "oh I'm black," even though like both parents could have really distinct identities around that culture.

After explicitly naming the complexity of answering that question, she then described herself, like the others, through her parents. “My mother is German and Swiss. My grandmother is German. My dad is Mexican. And I'm 34.”

### **Women of Color Identities**

Although many of the women were light skinned, and several could pass for white, all of the sixteen women in the project but two identified as women of color, in addition to identifying as mixed. For some women, that identification was solid and clear. They would make statements beginning with the phrase, “as a woman of color” and at times some spoke specifically about claiming that label. For women with dark

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<sup>2</sup> Linda explained that what the term hapa meant to her. She identifies with the term hapa “in a political context” that acknowledges mixed race Asian people. This is distinct, she explained, from hapa in a Hawaiian context (Linda’s mom’s family is from Hawaii), because “hapa is a little derogatory because it means you’re hapa-haule, half white, and that’s not really looked upon as something desirable in Hawaii.”



skin, their identity was often not a question, as exemplified by Alana's statement, "I totally identify [as a woman of color]. I don't have white skin privilege, I'll never be white." Linda, who was at times perceived as white described why she claimed the label she did. "So what I identify as basically is a person of color, because politically that's what seals it for me. And like that's what my conscientization<sup>3</sup> was around, around social inequity and social justice." She acknowledges that it is a "privilege being able to choose" her identity. For others, the label "women of color" was something they were newly claiming as their own. Jessica, for example, now 25, talked about how she used to think of herself more as white,

Yeah, I definitely see myself when I was younger identifying as more white than I do now. I think maybe it was just because I had a lot of white friends, half of my family was all white, and they were the family I was around more than the family on my father's side, and I think there's definitely been times where...there's only moments like where I questioned it, but I think a lot of time I didn't think about myself as a person of color. It was just like very invisible to me. And I definitely started seeing my identity differently when I moved out here [to Albuquerque], and I think that's part of just growing up and just thinking about it more, and being confronted with it more and then studying media and in that just talking about a lot of race issues that come up in media and how people just thinking about it more, and being confronted with it more and then studying media and in that just talking about a lot of race issues that come up in media and how people are represented in the media, and the fact that there's just a lot more brown people out here, and I have more brown friends out here, and talking with them about things...yeah I think those are all reasons.

As a follow up I asked her, "So you now identify as a woman of color?" She answered "yes" without hesitation and talked about the involvement she has recently had with a local woman of color organization. Jessica moved from Kansas City, where there were few brown people to Albuquerque, which has a high population of brown people. Also,

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<sup>3</sup> Linda mentions later that she doesn't know how to say the word in English. She is referring here to Freire's (2003) notion of conscientizacao. Freire explains that "the term conscientizacao refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35).

upon arriving in Albuquerque she began to work for a media justice organization. These experiences helped her begin to identify as a woman of color.

There were only two women who were hesitant to call themselves women of color, although they did not consider themselves white either. There was a sense with both of them of not knowing where the identity boundaries lay in race constructions. They were struggling to find comfort defining themselves in a racially dichotomized society in which they were often perceived as white. In the Oakland group interview Christina said,

So I think that I'm just like a newborn in the way that I'm just learning how to articulate my identity and really appreciate it ... When I go to women of color meetings or conferences, I feel really uncomfortable, because I pass as white. And I have privilege in that, you know? It's just really uncomfortable and hard. As of right now I don't know I don't know how I identify, as mixed is probably the best way.

In the Boston group interview, Mindy hesitantly identified herself as the one person in the group who did not claim a “woman of color” identity. In that group interview, I asked the question, “do all of you consider yourselves women of color?” Everyone said “yes” in unison, but Mindy, who responded,

I don't. Only because people take me for white so much. I don't identify, and I know I'm not necessarily that, society doesn't treat me as a woman of color because they don't see it in me so I don't have any experiences of that. So it's kind of interesting trying to nail down identity because I'm not a white person, but I'm not a woman of color because I just don't have those experiences.

Mindy wasn't quite sure where to place her identity. Throughout her interviews she talked about the disconnect of constantly being perceived as white and not feeling white. She said, “people identify me as white, but I mean, you know, that's fine, but that's not something I hold for myself because I think being identified that way and actually being that is really very different.” Mindy explained that the difficulty was that, “people will

look at you in a certain way and expect you to know certain things.” Because she was constantly being faced with expectations of acting white she could not meet she “developed some sort of intimacy issues” and was anxious to let people get to know her. One strategy Mindy has used to made connections with people without facing those expectations is to chat and blog online. She said, “I find a different way to interact with people where those insecurities are not brought to the fore so readily.”

In contrast, Joanna talked about how identifying as a person of color was more comfortable for her than claiming to be black. In response to my question and Mindy’s hesitation to claim the label women of color, Joanna said,

It’s interesting because I tend to reject the identity of calling myself black. Once in a blue moon it is relevant in whatever context I’m talking about, but I do strongly identify as not white. I just call myself brown, or a person of color. Whereas if somebody asked me if I were black, I would probably give them a long complicated answer. Whereas if somebody asked me if I were white, I would say no. Whenever somebody asked me if I were black I would go into whole spiel about my race politics and my identity, and my experience growing up, you know?

Joanna, although in rare cases people assume she is white or Jewish, has what might best be described as tan skin. In an individual interview Joanna explained,

Once in awhile I’ll call myself black when it’s relevant to the conversation. If I’m referring to being the only black person in a certain setting. Sometimes it’s just easier than saying a person of color or whatever. But, I think that, like the duality of it is very important to me because I grew up with both of my parents and they are still together and close to both of their families. I have trouble just calling myself black and denying, it feels to me like denying my father and his family. And I’m not ok with that. And also, it feels like denying a part of who I am. Especially because I don’t look like, you know, being a biracial is a big part of how the world views me, because I’m racially ambiguous and I get upset when other people try to force some identity on me.

Joanna is an anomaly in sometimes rejecting the label black. Throughout their interviews and in describing the way they identified, all but one of the other women revealed that in

some situations and at some times in their lives they identified themselves in relation to their heritage/race of color, for example as black, Japanese, Mexican, or Filipino.

Besides Joanna, Brittney who has brown skin, and who like Joanna is also mixed black and white, was the only other person who hesitated to claim only her heritage of color and said, “I’ve never said that I was one race. I’ve never identified myself as one race...Just because I have darker skin doesn’t mean that I should just claim one.” No other participants seemed to hesitate to use their heritage of color as a primary identity. Some like Maria, who was most likely to call herself Latina or Mexican, preferred to identify with their heritage of color, or as a woman of color, rather than mixed.

### **Definitely Not White**

In contrast to accepting identification with their heritage of color without needing to name their whiteness, none of the women accepted the label white if it was not qualified as being in combination with their heritage of color, in other words if it wasn’t made clear they were mixed. Even Mindy, in explaining that she doesn’t claim the label woman of color added immediately, “I’m not a white person.” This revealing story by Diana exemplifies the verve with which many of the women rejected the label white. Diana was visiting Manhattan and explained,

I was getting out of the cab on the wrong side; I was getting out in the street. And I didn’t see this guy on the bicycle, and I opened the door and he almost ran into me. And he said “you dumb, white bitch!” And I said (angrily and emphatically), “I am not white!”

Diana told this story twice, in both the group and an individual interview. In the group interview the group burst out in laughter in response to her story and another participant emphasized the point that to be called “white” was the worst insult of all. Reflecting on Diana’s story, she said, “You can call me stupid and a bitch, but don’t call me white!”

There were times when the women would admit to being part white or would claim to be white *and* Black, Filipina, etc. but no one ever consciously claimed to be exclusively white.

### **Shifts and Challenges to Identity**

For many of the women how they identified changed both over time and different situations. Some women shifted from claiming a primary mixed race identity to a monoracial identity of color, other women shifted from a monoracial identity to a mixed race identity. Even those who maintained the same racial/ethnic label often shifted in the core ways they viewed themselves racially and ethnically in relation to those around them. Perhaps most notable in the stories is the message that we rarely have fixed identities. Our identities shift in response to institutional life changes and perceptions and challenges by those around us. For example, Diana experienced a shift from identifying exclusively as black to also claiming a biracial identity. Diana was the oldest participant in the group, age 58, and grew up in an era in which there was no option to claim biraciality. She said,

I went to historically black schools, and I was raised as a black person, because in my generation you could be one thing or the other. And so I was always a black person until about 10 years ago when I started thinking about being biracial.

Although Diana was sometimes assumed to be white by others, she was raised as a black child, in a black neighborhood, and attended predominately black schools during a time in which anyone with any black ancestry was considered to be black. However, due to the changing climate of racial politics and the emergence of a multiracial movement, in the mid 1990s, Diana began to recognize the option of claiming a mixed race identity in addition to her identity as a black person. She has been exploring what her biracial

identity means and is writing a book about her life experiences and “the evolution of thought on biracialism.”

Alana, who is also mixed black and white but is about 25 years younger than Diana, experienced the opposite identity shift upon entering college. She explained:

I definitely grew up identifying as a biracial person. And that identity was definitely being half white and half black. And it changed, I guess, as I realized I was never perceived as white even though I have cultural whiteness. But then when I got into college and gained a more radical liberal consciousness I dropped the biracial identity, and just identified with being a black person and being a black woman, and later being a black queer woman. And I think that more recently as I'm sort of thinking about like privilege and power in my position as I'm doing community work and social justice work or education, I'm thinking more about my mixed-race identity more so in terms of like cultural whiteness as a form of cultural capital<sup>4</sup> and how I have a lot of that privilege and sort of rethinking about my mixed race identity. Also in terms of queer spaces, it shows up because I never identify as sort of a rigid border construct of a queer identity, like gay lesbian, bisexual. I like everything; I like a lot of things. So I feel I could just kind of float around in the borderlands in a lot of different ways.

For Alana, college became a space where she was able to name her identity in new ways; she shifted from a primary biracial identity to claiming an identity as a black woman.

However upon later reflection she felt that in order to acknowledge the privilege she held from having access to cultural whiteness, through being raised by her white mom in white spaces, she began to reclaim a mixed race identity.

Christina also marked college as the point of a racial identity shift. She explained how her identity was shaped by those around her from a very young age and college provided her the space to begin to reclaim her own identity. She said,

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural capital is a sociological concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1986) defines cultural capital as knowledge and skills that advantage people in dominant cultural institutions, such as schools, that are acquired through socialization usually by parents. Alana, a current master's student in an education, had a sophisticated articulation of her identity in relation to theory. In this excerpt she is locating her experience in relation to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in which she is asserting that being raised by her white mom provided her with white cultural ways of being that have advantaged her.

When I was in fourth grade I found familiarity with other Mexican kids. And I wanted to hang out with them. I was like, “I’m Mexican!” And I identified as Mexican even though I lived with my white mother. And so it was really hard for me because I wasn’t accepted by kids...And so slowly I began to transition into, I guess I identified more as White.... So for the past six years now I’ve been trying to juggle this identity of being mixed race, and trying to negotiate spaces in which I feel comfortable to identify as a woman of color... I think that if I never went to college I wouldn’t be thinking about being mixed race at all, because I wouldn’t have been exposed. Actually it was probably in high school. But I wouldn’t have been exposed to I guess just the ability or the tools to analyze or to be looking at myself.

Christina’s racial/ethnic self-identification was complicated by the fact that her Mexican father, who is light skinned with light hair, is white identified. Christina explained that her dad is “completely different” from the rest of his family “he’s Republican, and everyone else in my family is Democrat. He’s anti immigration. I mean it’s just weird.” Yet she spent lots of time with her extended family, who are Mexican identified, who consequently instilled in Christina a primary ethnic identification as Mexican.

It’s weird because when I was younger, I felt like I looked a lot like my family members. So that made me feel like I identify more as Mexican. I was always around Spanish speakers, but I don’t know any Spanish. When I was growing up, I felt like that was my culture. That’s how I grew to know myself and identify.

Yet outside of her home culture, because of her light skin, her inability to speak Spanish, and her Valley Girl accent, she was constantly challenged by people of color. Although she felt “different than other [white] people” she felt that since she didn’t speak Spanish that Latinas, “didn’t really validate” her. When she tried to insert herself in women of color spaces she got “these really weird looks... like a sort of, oh look at this white girl trying to be an ally.” All of this led her to, as she said, “be defensive of my mixed cultural background and really start to kinda like educate myself.”

Like Christina, Marta also had a white identified father, although he could not pass for white. She explained,

My father is mestizo and he's definitely brown skin. But my birth certificate says he's white, because Latinos unless they're obviously of *Indio* (Indian) or African descent are considered white. So he identifies as being white, even though he's not treated that way. He has a pretty heavy accent, and he's always looked at as being foreign or whatever. But you know that was his identity so it took me awhile to have an identity that wasn't that.

Similar to Christina's experience, Marta's dad's white identity led her to at first identify as white, but that identification changed over time and continually changes within different contexts. She says, "How I identify does change depending on what group I'm in. I felt like if I'm with a group of Jews then they take me as being Jewish, and if I'm in a Latin group then they take me as being Latin<sup>5</sup>." As the oldest woman in the Oakland group, age 46, she demonstrated a notable comfort with her identity. In a maternalistic, educative role, toward the end of the group interview, Marta explained that her self-acceptance was the result of a difficult, long, and continuing process. She said,

I didn't get here right away. Because initially, I mean my identity went from I don't know, not really having a racial identity - just being - and then getting politicized about it, back when it was "Third World," yeah, way back in the 70s. Back then I felt real pressure to just say I am Latina, I'm Latina, you know, and not talk about the white part with other people of color. They were like, "don't talk about that." I was like "oh okay, whatever." But then I was like, "fuck it, if they don't accept me for who I am then too bad," you know? This is who I am. It took a long time for me to be okay with everything, with who I am. It's always a work in progress.

Our identities are a work in progress because there are constant challenges and revelations related to race relations and race politics.

After Marta's comment, Christina, the youngest woman in the Oakland group, age 24, said,

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<sup>5</sup> Marta always used the term "Latin" to refer to herself. Because the more common term is Latina, I asked her why. She responded that she liked it because it was "nongendered." Marta did not feel that either gendered term "Latina" or "Latino" fit her because she considers herself "as much male as female." In Spanish words that end in "a" or "o" are often gendered female and male respectively.



When I was living in Austin for a few months I wrote something for this Latina group, and they rejected it because I'm mixed-race, and I said that. They said I talked too much about how I grew up with my mom who is white and that wasn't empowering.

Christina was consciously trying to claim her Latina heritage in a way that also acknowledged her mixed race identity, but she was shut down, which ultimately was “troubling to [her] identity work.” After Christina shared that story, Marta, in a continuing effort to provide validation to others said, “It always cracks me up when Latin people say, I’m *pura* (pure) Latina or I’m *pura* (pure) Chicana. It's like the whole thing about being Latin is that we're all mixed.” The history of Latino/a culture is one of a mixture of European, Indian, and African peoples as a result of colonization (Anzaldúa, 1987). Latino/a pride often entails a rejection of whiteness, the symbol of the European colonizer. Christina's explicit naming of her whiteness was not welcomed by the Latina group, and she was quickly silenced.

Ana also felt an identity shift as she matured. She explained,

For a long time I would just say that I'm half Filipino because it's just assumed that the other half is white. At some point, and partly it was because I felt I needed to declare, “you know there's something different about me so let's just cut to the chase, this is what's different about me, it's that I'm not all white.” But then at some point when my feminism started kicking in, I realized I was kind of denying my mother and that's not cool. She's always been there for me, you know? So now I'm usually pretty clear; “I'm half Filipino and I'm half British.” And actually I always say British because, uhm, British is white but there is this rich culture that comes with that. And I feel very British in a number of ways. And sometimes I still say, “I’m half Filipino,” it kind of depends on the situation. But I can say it now without feeling guilty about denying my mother.

Ana's connection to feminism and her white mother made her more consciously acknowledge and claim her British identity in addition to her Filipino identity.

Bobbi also talked about identifying differently in different contexts. She said,

Well I used to identify and Somali and white, but I think it always depends on what community I'm in. Like when I'm around black people I say "oh, I'm half white." And if I'm around white people I say, "oh, I'm half Somali." I used to say, "I'm Somali and white" but no one knew what that meant, so I kind of switched to black and white. But I also thought that, like, if I say I'm Somali and white it was like I'm trying to say that I'm not black.

Bobbi then explained that because she had to confront racism often in her life, by the time she was 18 race became important, and she felt the need to, "kind of define that and like name that and like say hey, 'this is who I am'."

However, naming her identity was complicated as she found that others didn't often know how to interpret her claims and she feared that claiming to be mixed black *and* white might be perceived as a denial of blackness, something she did not want to imply. But, as exemplified by her statement below, she is continuing to struggle with how to situate herself, wondering about the intersections of culture, race, and politics and where she lies within that. She continued,

But now, I don't know. Maybe it's just because the country is so fucked up and out of control, I don't really feel like, I don't know I just kind think of myself as like cultures and locations I don't only think of myself as races so much because I don't know, maybe because I never really like, I don't know. I don't know why. But that's how it is.

Bobbi explained that Somalia is no longer a place she felt, "proud to be associated with because" she said, "we've been at war since 1982." As a child she was raised around African nationalism and learned that outside sources caused the problems in Africa, so the civil wars where people were hurting their own made it hard for her to maintain pride in her country. Then she added,

I mean if I tell somebody that I'm Somali, that tells very little about me because I grew up in the barrio [in Phoenix]. And what does it mean to be Somali? Like my dad was a goat herder, but then my dad was an engineer, but then the only Somali's I've hung out with are refugees in farming communities. So I just kind

of think that like I don't really see people racially as much as I relate to people who are from similar backgrounds.

Bobbi is one of only two people in the group that at times claimed an identity completely separate from her “biological” racial/ethnic background. She said that when she was “a little kid” she used to “lie” and say that she was “Puerto Rican.” Rather than try to explain to others why she looked so different from her sister who had much darker skin and stronger Somali features, she created a fantasy family. Bobbi knew other mixed Somali/white kids who looked similar to her so she took pictures of them which she brought to school describing them as her Puerto Rican cousins. Bobbi was often taken to be Latina and grew up in Phoenix in a community with Latino/as. Claiming a Puerto Rican identity was a way to have an identity that didn’t need explaining and probably wouldn’t be challenged by her peers.

Another participant also temporarily took on an identity outside of her own. Linda has a Japanese mother and a white father, but she was raised primarily by her mom and her black step father who she calls her “dad.” Like so many of the other participants, her identity changed from one context to another and in many places she felt “different.” Before coming to her current conclusion of identifying as hapa and as a person of color, she went through a time of identifying as black. She said,

Like how I move in spaces changes then moves, you know, depending on the situation. And it changed before I was even really conscious of what my identity was around shit. I would get shit; I knew that I was different. I was different from this family, or I was different from that family, for sure. Plus my dad's family was black. I don't look like anyone. And in my mom's family I'm the tallest person. So recognizing my difference and not being able to name it, and then kind of being able to name it, and then naming it incorrectly. I thought it was black because of where I rolled, you know - my neighborhood, my friends, my dad. So I was like, yeah, I must be black, I'm different, right? But like finally I was able to name it, and yet so much changes all the time.

I asked her, “When you say you were able to name it, what does that mean?” She responded with, “being mixed, being hapa specifically.” She explained, “Growing up in Bayview which is predominately African-American, and my dad was black and my mom was Japanese, I thought I was black in high school.” She even attended Black Student Union (BSU) meetings with her friends until her mom challenged her.

My mom called me out one day. She was like, “oh, you're not going to be home until late?” And I was like, “yeah, how did you know?” And she said, “oh, you're wearing all-black so you must be going to a BSU meeting.” I was, like, “oh my gosh.” It kind of dawned on me around that time, “oh yeah, I'm not black,” and I know that. That was sophomore year, so I was 14 or 15.

Linda explained that even though she recognized then that she wasn't black and shouldn't be going to BSU meetings, that her “identity politics came a lot later though,” in college. Going to college, reading Gloria Anzaldúa<sup>6</sup>, and meeting other mixed people helped her form her identity politics. Even though only two participants took on such imposter identities, the writings by mixed race people (Camper, 1994 and Creef, 1990) show that it is not altogether unusual for mixed race people to claim an identity unrelated to their heritages, especially one which for which they are often mistaken or to which they feel a connection through peers.

Maria has light skin and wasn't raised speaking Spanish, but her name and circumstances helped her feel solid in her brown identity. She said that as a result of growing up in a Chicano neighborhood, “I just kind of grew up knowing that I was brown, and people around me were brown, my name is brown.” Her Spanish last name (given to her by her Mexican dad), her Spanish-pronounced first name, and her early entrenchment in a Chicano community shielded her from challenges to her Latina

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) wrote a ground-breaking book about what it means to live in racial, sexual, language, culture, and gender borderlands titled *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

identity. She said, “I have a brown name. I don't know what my life would be like if I had gone through with a different name and having to explain myself in a different way. Nobody asked me to explain.” Still, she experienced significant shifts in race and gender identity related to experiences in school.

Maria, who was always thin and petite, explained that there were “two big shocks” for her that she experienced among her peers in school.

One was entering into seventh-grade, walking into the junior high and feeling like all my friends were women. I remember having seen Dora in May in sixth grade. And then seeing her in seventh-grade, when school started, and she had super-high chola<sup>7</sup> hair, and was in these tight jeans, and her hair was all big, and she had on all this make-up. And I was still like this little girl who left the sixth grade 3 months ago, and these were young women who were now in seventh-grade. I remember that being one of the biggest things for me. And I remember everybody else being taller, everybody had big boobs, everybody was talking about their periods. And I just felt like I was in some other world. It was crazy. I was like, wait these are all people I knew! There were five or six schools that fed into my junior high so there were a lot of new people too. I just wasn't prepared for that.

Maria was raised without any television, and she expressed anger that no one warned her of the impending change from elementary school to junior high. She said,

There's a part of me that's like, nobody even said you know, “it's going to be different, and it doesn't need to be scary, but it's going to be different *mija*,<sup>8</sup>” you know? “There's going to be more kids there. Boys and girls are going to be growing at different rates now, so they're going to be boys and girls who are bigger than you,” or whatever.

She said that she remembers feeling like she didn't belong and added,

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<sup>7</sup> According to the online “urban dictionary” the definition of chola that got the most votes was posted by Suavecita. She said, “a Chola is a latina that wears a lot of makeup: thick eyeliner, liquid eyeliner on top going out of your eye dark brown or red lipstick and eyebrows drawn on or really thin. We mostly have permed hair with hella gel or straight and arched on top. We kick it with people in our own barrio and not really claiming a color mainly your raza. (Brown Pride) or (Barrio) and wear baggy or tight clothes with nike cortez shoes.” In other words chola is slang for a certain look displayed by some Latinas.

<sup>8</sup> Mija is an affectionate term for daughter, a shorted version of *mi hijita*, which literally translates to “my little daughter.”

But I don't know how much of that was race stuff and how much of that was just me feeling like I did not belong. And the other thing too, is that I was placed in gifted classes so I was always, there was always some sort of separation.

Being in gifted classes separated her both from her peers in the neighborhood, many of whom were not in those classes, and from other girls because she became a “school-girl,” the eighties term for a nerd.

I felt separated in that way. And it was always an issue, like, you're really smart, huh? Like, you're a smart girl. That was a term in the 80s, right, school-girl. They were like “well, she's a school-girl.” And that's what I got called. And yet at the same time a lot of people left me alone. Like I really didn't get picked on too much, like it was just kind of like oh, she's a school-girl.

So for Maria, the first “shock” was moving from elementary to junior high and not being prepared for the new gender dynamics. This was exacerbated by being placed in gifted classes.

Part of what she feels like saved her from being teased was her ability to dance and her wide range of music tastes. At her school, the white kids listened to “Van Halen and all that.” The “brown” kids were into “break dancing” and Michael Jackson. Maria explained, “So the differences around race were also really defined by music too. I kind of listened to everything and anything. Like I knew songs on both sides, and also stuff that nobody liked, like Duran-Duran.” She was thankful that her parents let her go to school dances which she believed also “saved” her from harassment. She said that, by attending the dances,

At least people got to see me out. And I always felt like I was faking it, but actually would hear from people that they thought I was good dancer. And I think that that just kind of like was something. Like, I could be a school-girl but at least I could dance, does that make sense?

When she posed that question I could and did reply honestly that it made perfect sense to me because I had a similar experience in many ways. I had two groups of friends – white

friends and friends of color - who listened to two completely different kinds of music, and, like Maria, I listened to it all. Although my school was predominately white, my ability to dance saved me in spaces with other people of color which for me were roller skating rinks and under 21 clubs. I may be smart, I may be light-skinned, I may even live in a white town, but at least I could dance. However, unlike Maria, I never felt like I was faking it. I had been taught to dance at a young age by my Latina mom and my *tías*; on the dance floor I always felt at home.

The second big shock for Maria occurred when she transitioned from public school to a private high school.

My second thing was high school. Because then I went to Catholic high school in another part of town. My junior high was like four blocks from my house, but now I had to take a city bus and I was in a whole other place. So now I'm not even in my neighborhood. And that was probably the next really big shock.

Maria explained that attending private high school had nothing to do with religion. Her parents felt it was important to have a good education so they sent her and her three siblings to private high schools. The only choice she was given was which of the two local private schools she wanted to attend. She chose the school that was closer and less wealthy. The new school was predominately white and a culture shock. There was an upside but a larger downside,

Here it was like now it was okay for me to get good grades, it was okay for me to want to excel in that way. But the standards of beauty at that school and the culture there were radically different than where I had come from, right? Because the girls I thought were pretty from my neighborhood weren't the girls that were at that school. So all of a sudden, it's like white girls were pretty. And that's the first time when I got it. I was like oh. So if you think about it. I was outside of media. And I thought brown girls were pretty because the boys always liked the brown girls because that's what was there. And so now I'm like, oh wait they like white girls, and oh wait, white girls are what they see.

Maria, who was, “definitely read as Latina, or Mexican” by her classmates, did not fit the new standards of beauty. Given these early life experiences, college did not have as large an impact on her as it did on other people because she had already experienced two “really big culture shocks.”

Other participants talked about major shifts in identity that related to gender and sexuality as well as race. Alana, for example, talked about when she was younger how for her “femininity was so much about white womanhood” and she really tried “to perform a white femininity.” But now, she says, “I don’t feel like I am performing that.” This is related to several factors including a shift in who she dated from white men to men of color and later from dating men to dating women. She said, “I never really came into my femme identity until I started to identify as a queer person.” Linda similarly talked about feeling different as a teen from her peers as a queer girl. When she was a freshman in high school there were a group of junior and senior boys who took interest in her friends but she was “exempt” from that attention. I wondered why as Linda struck me as quite attractive so I asked her surprised, “you were exempt?” She replied, “Yeah, I was, I don't know, gay at an early age. I don't know. Gawky and awkward, I don't know. Yeah, no, no one was interested in me. I'm really glad though, because it was high drama, high drama.” Before she came into her gay identity, she was an outsider.

Two people who did not describe major shifts in identity were Brittney and Elizabeth. They were the only two participants who reflected on their mixed race identity as almost exclusively positive. Brittney, who’s mom is white and dad is black, started her individual interview and her group interview saying she “loves” to be mixed because she can “see the view of two different people” and because “combining races is



beautiful” to her. Throughout her interviews her reflections on her life as a mixed race person were overwhelmingly positive. Although she had encountered some racial discrimination she tended not to internalize it and rather viewed it as “their problem.” There were a few instances where she was called the n word. She shared stories of the sister of a boyfriend and an ex girlfriend of a boyfriend calling her “nigger.” She shrugged it off.

You know I just think they didn't have anything else to say. So they couldn't say anything else so they had to use that. It's like “Ok, you know, pull out your race card or whatever.” It's like “You don't have anything else to put me down for. If you're calling me a nigger to put me down that's not putting me down, you're just ignorant. I mean that's an awful thing to say to somebody, but it's not directed towards me I feel. I feel like it's just you being dumb. I mean that's not something I can change, nor would I want to. So if you're calling me nigger to like put me down, that's not putting me down. Really. You know? I'm not getting offended by you calling me that, I'm offended by you using that word, you know? If that's the only thing you can say to me to insult me then I really don't feel that bad. ‘Cause I don't feel bad about my race. I love my race. So if that's what you're using to like- if that's what you have against me, then you really don't have anything against me.

Brittney was one of the youngest participants, age 26, and was the only person in the study who had not attended college. I wondered how her identity might shift in the future. I could already see the beginning of a shift in consciousness as we reached the end of the Albuquerque group interview when she said,

These interviews have opened up my eyes a lot. I notice things more I think. It makes me look at people and notice things more whereas before I was just kind of like, I never noticed that. I never noticed any racism or anything, maybe I just didn't want to notice, so I didn't see it. But now I think I'm going to notice it more, and be more aware of what's going on.

She didn't seem bothered by her new awareness, rather she seemed curious about this new consciousness, and it prompted in her to want to learn more about her family history. At the beginning of the second individual interview, after she had participated in the

group interview and heard the stories of other mixed women she said, “Like I want to research my ancestors more. I think that'd be awesome. And I never really thought about it before but I want to know.”

As I listened to Brittney's stories I couldn't help but wonder how much of her overwhelmingly positive experiences with others were influenced by the fact that she was a beautiful, conventionally feminine, straight woman. The word that comes to mind when I think of how to describe her is “adorable.” She was always dressed with cute clothes, high heels, a perfect manicure, full make up, and ponytail hair pieces so well placed you would never know (except that she showed me her extensive hair piece collection) that it wasn't her natural hair. Although she could never pass for white, she definitely fit in to conventional norms of sexuality and gender and to some extent, beauty (when considering non-white images of beauty in the mainstream). She showed me a picture of her and three mixed race friends, one of whom was a professional model, and the photo looked like it could be an advertisement in a fashion magazine. Thus it was not surprising that, in many ways, her experiences with others were often positive. However, I do not want to minimize the fact that Brittney also had a very warm, sweet personality, a genuine openness to others, and a generally positive outlook on life. She is outgoing and social and told several stories of reaching out to make new friends. All of these factors played a role in her positive experiences living as a mixed race female.

Elizabeth, whose mom is Filipina and dad is white, also described her experiences as mostly positive. She was quiet for much of the group interview. At one point I checked in with her and asked her if she had anything to add, and she said,

I guess I feel almost out of place little bit. You know? In our individual interviews I just kept stressing how much I love being mixed race. It's been such

a positive experience for me. I don't have a lot of issues, I guess, about being mixed race. I don't have a lot of angst about it. I feel really comfortable being mixed race. It's interesting for me having somebody else in the group who is half Filipino and half white. That's why I asked you [referring to the other mixed Filipino/white woman in the group] about it right away. Because my mom was so positive about me being mixed race. Because I feel being half Asian and half white is not fraught like being half black and half white. It's like people are really willing to see you. If your part black then it's not okay. But if your part Asian, they're very willing to see you as white. For me it's not been a problem. I haven't had people say weird stuff to me because they assume I'm white. I haven't had people expose their inner racism to me. Except for one of our coworkers. I tell you about that later.

Elizabeth had described to me in her individual interviews that within Filipino culture, mixed race people, known as *mestizo/a*, are generally thought of positively. Elizabeth explained that “being mixed race is regarded highly” and that most of the movie stars are mixed race, “partially white.” She revealed that she had a darker skinned cousin, who she was very close to, and relatives would make comments about how dark she was and tell her not to go out in the sun. She and her cousin would deal by joking about it. She said, “[My cousin] and I used to, in a fourth grade way, we’d joke about race. She’d be like, you whitey, you cracker. We were absolutely aware of the privilege that I enjoyed.” As a revered mestiza she said, “I don’t feel troubled.”

Mindy, the other mixed Filipino woman in the group, struggled considerably with her identity, and in the group interview, she often talked about the difficulties of being mixed. This shocked Elizabeth who assumed that other mixed Filipinos would have similarly positive experiences. Elizabeth, age 31, had attended college and graduate school but had always viewed her experiences as overwhelmingly positive. She could pass for white, and acknowledged her white privilege which she felt added to her positive experiences; she said, “I pass so much for white, I don’t encounter much of anything.”

That her whiteness was revered didn’t trouble her.

Although all of the women had positive things to say about being mixed race, all but Brittney and Elizabeth talked about the struggles of being mixed. As can be derived from the stories shared thus far, there were often moments of angst and suffering in relation to identity formation. What most of the women had in common were shifting and changing self-identifications and accompanying wide-ranging feelings related to their mixed race identities which were influenced by life experiences and situational contexts.

### **Influences on Identity Formation**

These stories of identity formation point to the intersections among race, class, sexuality, and gender. Race/ethnic identification is intricately intertwined with other social positionalities. Although it is impossible to document all the intricacies of each woman's story, upon review of all the data it is clear that how the women identified was impacted by a myriad of factors. As each of these women struggled to formulate their racial and ethnic identities, they were constantly faced with constricting external structures and personal challenges from family and peers. Some of the factors that influenced racial/ethnic identities include: language (as in Maria's story of having a Spanish name solidifying her brownness), home culture (as in Christina's story of feeling Mexican), relationships to each parent (as in Ana's story of more consciously claiming her British side to acknowledge her relationship to her mom), where someone grew up (as in Diana's story of growing up in a historically black neighborhood, appearance (as in Mindy's story of not feeling she can claim space as a person of color because she looks white), school (as in Maria's story of culture shocks), and friends (as in Jessica's story of feeling white because she had white friends). Because the main marker in the social

construction of race is skin color, one might assume that skin color would be the primary factor in racial identification. That was not the case in this group.

Even though my parents never talked to me about my mixed race identity, one of the most shocking findings for me was that almost no one's parents talked to them about their racial identities. I asked each participant at some point, "did you talk about race at home?" or "did your parents talk to you about race?" Although in some households there were discussions about race related politics, there were only two participants, Joanna and Katherine, who remember having distinct conversations about *their racial identities* with their parents, and they were siblings. Katherine recalled,

About being mixed ... the first time I remember talking about it in my family was really young. I remember my mother, in my mind, she worried about it a lot. And it was her job to teach us what it was to be a person of color, what it was to be black. My dad was not involved in that.

She says that at first she "didn't get it" but eventually she had experiences that helped her to understand why her mom worked to educate her. Unfortunately she did not have a close personal relationship with her mom anymore, and she didn't talk with her mom about her experiences. Ruth, whose dad is African-American, remembers that for "the little bit that he was around" (she described in her interviews how he was a mostly absent father) that they, "talked about racism a lot, and [she] think[s] he did a pretty good job of preparing [her] for the real world." For everyone else issues of racial identity were unspoken, assumed, and insinuated.

Given the lack of talk in their homes about racial identity, many of the women had no idea how their parents perceived them. In response to a question on this issue, I received responses like, "You know I really don't know, I wish I did. I know they really are proud of me. I know they love me" (Alana) or "I really didn't talk to my parents a lot

about identity and about being mixed race. It's still not something that my family really talks about, but I don't think it's so much that they're trying hide it in some way" (Janet). As young people, they were overwhelmingly left to construct their own identities, often with no role models because there were no mixed race adults around them.

At the end of the group interview in Boston, I asked if there were any messages they wanted to pass along to readers. Mindy spoke up with a message for parents who have mixed race children. She said, "Know that your children's experiences are very different from how you grew up. My father grew up in a white community, my mom in the Philippines. How we grew up had nothing remotely connected, it was much more of a tri-cultural mix." Mindy demonstrated a thirst for greater understanding and acknowledgement of mixed race identity. The two who did have a parent who talked to them explicitly about being mixed race appreciated that their mom tried to make them comfortable with their identities. However, Katherine explained that she was "traumatized" learning about slavery when she was "too young to see it" and that even though she "had a sense of what race meant in the world" she "never experienced it." She believes that her mom did the best she could but her mom didn't realize that her experience as a black woman raised during civil rights would be different than the experiences of her biracial children during different times. Still they seemed grateful to have been given tools to deal with racism.

In the 'Mixed Race' Studies Reader, Ifekwunigwe (2004) delineates three "ages" of mixed race identity: the age of pathology, the age of celebration, and the age of critique. The "age of pathology" refers to the time period from the beginning of colonialism in the U.S. to the 1980s. During this time "hybrid" forms, including mixed

race people, were viewed as degenerate. Hybrids stood at the center of eugenics debates, and anti-miscegenation laws were passed in hopes of discouraging the production of mixed race offspring. Mixed race people were viewed as threats. Then in the 1990s a new set of writings emerged in which the authors, many of whom were mixed race, acknowledged and worked to reverse the damaging perspectives about mixed race people. The writers often celebrated mixed race people and legitimated mixed race as a social category, marking the beginning of a new mixed race canon. Ifekwunigwe refers to that shift as the beginning of the “age of celebration”. It wasn’t long before these celebratory writings were accompanied by more critical works. In the mid 1990s there began an “age of critique” in which

scholars continue to grapple with unresolved tensions between identification and categorization and structure and agency, i.e. the tangle of census terminology or the political limitations of a ‘Multiracial Movement (Aspinal 1997, Colker 1996, Cose 1997, Morning 2003, Nobles 2002).

The participants’ stories reflect of all the “ages” Ifekwunigwe describes. Because identity formation is constantly in flux and constantly shifting, people can occupy various identity positions. For these women, mixed race identity is simultaneously painful and joyful. We continue to face pathologizing of our identities, we celebrate our identities, and we critique our identities and are critiqued by others for our mixed race identities. Our journeys of identity formation are at times empowering and at times deflating. What is apparent, however, is that our identities are constantly up for speculation and determination by others. This begins early in school when we are forced to identify our race for standardized tests – an issue raised specifically by five participants.

Why is it that so many people feel they have the right to challenge and name our identities for us? Why is it that we are expected to prove ourselves? What do we gain

from engaging in that game? Is it possible for us to avoid it? How do we find a home in a structure that makes no place for us? The women's stories raise these questions. They are hard questions to answer because as race is a social and political construct (Omi and Winant, 1994) its meaning can never easily be captured or described. Williams (2004) raises important questions about what determines race and culture in her essay, "Race-ing and Being Raced." She asks,

How do we determine authentic membership into a racial group: by birth? blood ties? kinship organization? geographic upbringing? cultural socialization? presence or absence of one parent's heritage? phenotypical resemblance? a combination of these variables? and moreover, who determines racial and ethnic authenticity?

When it comes to being mixed race, it often feels that everyone claims the right to determine our racial authenticity. We experience challenges to our identities by both white people and people of color who are often searching for an answer from us that expresses a fixed identity. In addition, we are expected to back up our "choice" with evidence – in the form of life experiences, languages, skin color, etc. – that support our spoken identification.

We learn from these participants that it is possible to hold multiple racial identities simultaneously; all of the women do so. For example, almost all women identified simultaneously as women of color, mixed race, and Latina, black, or Japanese (etc.). These stories demonstrate that there are a plethora of factors influencing racial/ethnic identity, of which skin color is only a small part. We learn that racial identification cannot be extricated from other social identity factors such as class, gender, and sexuality as we hear narratives that illuminate intricate webs of social identity position. We learn that mixed race identity is simultaneously painful and powerful.



These women both celebrate and critique their positionalities, and they are both celebrated and critiqued by others.

Amidst a fair amount of joking about how “we are beautiful,” with the individual and group interviews, there was a simultaneous desire to claim our beauty without essentializing it. Also, as evidenced by the unanimous rejection of a solely white identity and the overwhelming choice to identify as women of color, these women recognized the political importance of claiming non-white identities. In the introduction to her 1994 Mixed Race Women anthology *Miscegenation Blues*, Carol Camper wrote that she refused to include submissions written from a “colonized point of view” which she explained:

One such place is the idea that racial mixing would be the so called ‘future’ of race relations and the future of humanity. One or two contributors do mention it, briefly, without necessarily agreeing with it. I strongly disagree with this position. It is naïve. It leaves the race work up to the mixed people and our entire histories and cultures as if we are obsolete. It is essentially a racist solution.

For this reason I think it is important for mixed people who have White ancestry to not identify only as mixed but to stress identity with their coloured ancestry. This would be different for those who have no White ancestry, though there can still be oppressor/oppressed history in their lineage which may require examining.

Our existence is not meant to annihilate. We simply exist. We should not be forced into a ‘closet’ about White or any other parentage, but we must recognize that our location is as women of color. (xxiii)

Although there were a few instances in which the participants alluded to believing that the mixing of the races was the answer to racial segregation and racism, for the most part they were thoughtful and critical of their positions within this debate and all of them recognized the importance of maintaining their cultures and racialized identities.

This chapter only scratches the surface of racial identity formation for us as mixed race women. The next two chapters will delve further into the intricacies of racial

identity formation as mixed race women as we examine the structure of insider/outsider positionalities in chapter 5 and how the women take agency in the production of fluid identities in chapter 6.

## **Outsider/Insider: The Constraints of Negotiating Institutional Structures and Identity Challenges**

*I guess the drawback of being mixed-race is only rarely feeling completely comfortable. Like it's great to feel partially comfortable in so many different settings, but it's a really narrow spot where I feel like absolutely, "I'm like you." Maybe it's with other mixed-race people, or it's with other children of immigrants, no matter what race or background. Maybe it's with other Asian-Americans who are several generations of American. But yeah, it's hard to be, I can't just get my Filipino family who are immigrants, we are just not alike. And it's hard for me to be around my dad's family, because they're so white, they just don't get stuff. But I think there is a benefit to being only partially comfortable that outweighs the discomfort. I'd rather be partially comfortable with lots of different people, but only be super comfortable with this one group, you know?— Elizabeth*

*Well yeah, it's the comfort of, I know I can fit in this group but I'm not really being myself, you know? I know I can feel comfortable enough, and these people do not think I'm a threat or whatever, but it's never like I really reveal my entire personality, or my entire self. - Joanna*

*My oldest cousin, when she got married, her husband came to me and was really serious. He said, "Linda can I ask you a question, I don't want you to be offended or anything, but it's really important and if you want to talk about it I'd really love to. If you don't that's okay too, but what was it like for you growing up mixed?" I told him that it's hard. And that I didn't feel like I fit in, the outsider stuff, that I didn't feel like I fit in anywhere, that the Asian kids didn't really identify me as Asian, and the white kids saw me as something kind of different, you know? – Linda*

The women in my study shared a myriad of stories of being simultaneous insiders and outsiders, of feeling a mixture of comfort and discomfort in all areas of their lives as mixed race women. Often these feelings of belonging and not belonging occurred simultaneously. There was no escape from identity challenges. They occurred within their families, with friends, at work, at school, and in interactions with strangers. The women's stories demonstrate a sense of struggle to find a place of belonging, a longing for insider identity, with a simultaneous recognition that outsider status also has its

benefits. There was a constant negotiation between the external constraints of structure and the internal ability to claim agency with a betwixt and between situational position.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1977, 1984) argues that structure and agency act in concert with each other. There is a dialectical relationship between action and structure (1977, p. 53). Giddens (1977) reminds us that the “reflexive monitoring of action includes the monitoring of *the setting of the interaction*, and not just the behavior of the particular actors taken separately” (p. 57). Thus to best understand the explanations of why the participants act as they do it is important to know the settings of the actions and the way that structure, time, and place are impactingsituating the behaviors of individuals. The next two chapters examine structure and agency, specifically insider/outsider positionalities for these mixed race women.

In this chapter I focus on the ways family, school, and work structures constrict the agency of the women. However, first I begin with the identity challenges that strangers create for these women. These experiences with strangers, with family, at school, and at work constitute much of human life. I emphasize here how the women are placed by external forces into certain positions and categories. In the next chapter I draw attention to how the women claim positions of strength within their fluid, ambiguous identities. The separation, the emphasis on structure in one chapter and agency in another, is strategic, yet artificial, because structure and agency are always interrelated and directly influencing each other. Thus the stories of both chapters reveal elements of intersecting structure and agency. The purpose of the separation is to remind the readers that structural and external constraints limit self-actualization while at the same time minimizing a tendency to pathologize or pity our mixed race experiences with a chapter

dedicated by itself to agency and the power of fluid, mixed race identities. Giddens (1977) explains that agentic actions create structure which then limits agentic options but also allows them as well. I attempt to situate these women's experiences within the interplay of structure and agency.

In literature by and/or about mixed race people there has been a tendency to either pathologize (Knox, 1950; Nott & Gliddon, 1854; Rich, 1990) or uncritically celebrate (Root, 1992; Zack, 1993) the mixed race experience. This study serves to dismantle that dichotomy between pathological experiences and universally celebratory experiences by demonstrating the complexity of these women's lives and the ways in which they occupy concurrent insider and outsider positionalities, locations of simultaneous power and oppression, strength and weakness, possibility and impossibility.

### **Facing the “What Are You?” Question**

Many mixed race people experience being asked, “What are you?” by a variety of people. In fact in 1999, Pearl Fuyo Gaskins, published a book about the experiences of young mixed race adults with that title. Almost all the women in my study had experiences with others asking them that question. For some it occurred almost daily, for others it occurred only within certain contexts when something – how they danced, a word they used, a food they ate – would indicate to others that they might be of a different background than the person originally thought. There were a wide range of feelings and responses by the women in reaction to that question. Some women welcomed the question as an opportunity to educate or explain themselves, others felt offended by the question, others were asked the question so often that they were simply tired of it, while some questioned whether or not they wanted to put energy into

answering the question and dealing with the implications of their responses. But what seemed to have the most impact on how the participants perceived the question was the assumed intention of the question.

In addition to the “what are you?” question there were variations and offshoots that often felt like direct challenges to identity. In the Boston group interview there was a lengthy discussion about these “what are you?” challenges to identity by strangers.

Joanna shared an experience of being on a school bus as a sixth grader when a black girl approached her and said in a threatening voice, “Are you black or are you white?”

Joanna explained that at that moment, “I was all ready to have to defend my multiracial identity, and be like, ‘I’m not going to deny one side or the other,’ you know?” But when Joanna responded in a non-threatening voice, “actually, I’m both” the girl simply said, “oh, okay” and walked away. Joanna explained that she believes that for some the idea of being mixed, “never occurred to them as a possibility. And then when they think about it they’re like, ‘okay.’” Joanna shared that, in her experience, “almost all the people who correctly identify [her] racial background have met other mixed people.” She elaborated that people who “grew up in fairly diverse areas” know she’s “something other than white” but aren’t sure what she is. She has only “ever only known white people” who “assume [she’s] white or Jewish.” Joanna’s explanation was supported by other women’s stories.

Most of the women explained that it was primarily white people who assumed they were white. For example, Elizabeth said, “I feel like it’s easy for white people to see you as the same as them.” Participants found that often white people got defensive when

they emphasized their identities as mixed or as women of color. In the group interview, Diana began a story emphasizing this point to which three other women added on:

Diana: I've been taken for white so much in my life that sometimes I don't say anything. It doesn't mean I'm trying to pass, it's just that I don't feel like getting into it with somebody. I had a coworker, a white man, he stormed my desk he came up to my desk hit his fist on the table, and said "Why do you go around saying that you're black?"

Joanna: yeah

Mindy: yeah it's like they're offended that you claim something other than

Diana: than being white

Mindy: yeah

Diana: that you don't want to be white

Mindy: yeah

Susan: that's the key

Mindy: That's been all of my negative experiences with white people. When they find out that that the identity is something that's mixed.

Joanna: Yeah but you would get your ass kicked by whatever community of color you're a part of if you say that you're white.

Diana: The thing is that there are a lot of white people in America who are not white. There's always been people that have been passing and crossing over from all these different ethnicities, you know? And white people are so oblivious to that. Look at somebody, and they're so dark, and their hair is so kinky, and you're like, this is a white person? And yet to them they're a white person.

This reflective exchange is indicative of white ignorance and the desire by white people, sometimes consciously other times unconsciously, to suppress mixed race identities.

Most of the women expressed anger at these challenges and acknowledged that it was white entitlement that allowed people to feel justified in making the challenges.

Initially Susan argued against assigning intent to the question of one's racial positionality. She explained that the question she always has to field when she tells people that she's Latina and white is, "How did that happen?" Susan argued that some people just don't have the life experiences around racial issues to understand that their question is offensive. Joanna, however, was incredulous and exclaimed, "but that's rude. How could you not even know that that's rude?" Susan maintained that some people are "really clueless" and "just don't understand." Mindy chimed in on the conversation and argued,

But going back to intent. I think, I know it is hard to determine the intent of every question, but a lot of times I feel like because my issues have usually been with white people, I always felt that some of these questions were just coming from a place of entitlement.

Ruth immediately backed her up adding, "yes, definitely." To which Mindy added, "All these questions are very invasive and very personal. So it's like, why do you feel like you can ask these questions? You don't know me." When I asked Ruth to explain her emphatic reaction she illuminated the undo burden of having to constantly deal with white people's entitlement. She said:

I don't know why I had such a reaction to that. I think one of my biggest issues with people is attitudes of entitlement. I really can't stand that. And I feel like I have to point that out more than I should. I think that a lot of people who feel entitled have no idea that they act that way. And it gets tiresome to have to show that. Because I feel like, how many other people have the nerve, or whatever, to hold a mirror to these people who act entitled? And I'm one of those people who believes that if somebody's being out of line you tell them exactly how they're being out of line. So maybe they'll learn something. Because I think sometimes people can be told, "Hey, you're being out of line." And they're like, "Oh, I'm really sorry," and they'll adjust. But there are other people who, you know, have been told they're jerks all their lives and they still don't make any attempt to change. But I think I have some resentment about having to correct so many people, you know? It's 2006 and we're still not anywhere near where I'd like to be.

In response Joanna said,



It's funny there's only one phase of my life where I had resentment about these questions. Usually I actually enjoy those questions as long as they're not downright rude, even if they're a little bit rough around the edges. Because I take it as a chance to educate these people and to share my experience. Which is always interesting to me and to them, you know? But when I was in college I had a department full of rednecks and I became like a department hippie, *the* diversity. So I was constantly having to combat them day in and day out, I had to stand up because I was only person who had a conscience about it. And at that point in my life I definitely resented having to constantly put on a black hat, or the feminist hat, or the whatever.

Mindy, responding to Joanna's story, said, "They don't understand that they're making you a representative."

These stories demonstrate a variety of reactions in response to "what are you?" related questions. There is a dual reaction by the participants of resenting the need to endure the challenges and the defensiveness of others while at times welcoming the possibility to educate because there is a simultaneous desire to help others understand their lives and perspectives. Joanna's description of using the questions to educate people demonstrates agency. Diana's opening comment that sometimes she doesn't say anything because she "doesn't feel like getting into it" is also a form of agency.

At times however, the "what are you?" identity challenges are clear exertions of white power, as evidenced in this story by Diana.

I remember this time that I was driving to this gas station to get gas. And this was in South Carolina and the guy pumping the gas order puts his head into the driver's window and says, "we see you here all the time, what are you?" I didn't say anything, so he said, "your Spanish?" I said, "no." So he went around the car and then he came back and he said, "Injun." I said, "no." He had this whole list of everything, so finally he said, "I give up what are you?" I said, "I'm black." So he starts shouting to this other man inside the office, "Joe, Joe come out here!" So he tells me, "get out of the car and turn around so we can look at you." He says to Joe, "this girl says she's black!" And I said, "If you don't get out of the way I'm just going to run your foot right over." And I took off. I couldn't believe it. (7)

Not only was Diana questioned about her identity, but she was subsequently denied the right to define herself and expected, like an animal, to parade herself for approval by the racist white man who challenged her racial identity and demanded her sexuality.

In the Albuquerque group interview there was also a discussion about challenges to identity by strangers. Brittney, concurring with the sentiment of the Boston group of the difficulty dealing with confrontations by white people said, “It seems like you could talk more open with people who aren’t white.” She talked about the safety of receiving the “what are you?” question from other mixed race people because it is about making connection. But then turning the discussion slightly from where it lay in the Boston interview, with a focus on challenges by white people, she raised the issue of being challenged by black people who aren’t mixed. Brittney began the discussion and Maria finished it.

Brittney: Yeah, but when like a black person who’s completely black asks me, it’s kind of like, “oh, well your not...”

Maria: (interrupting) like they are testing you. For me it's more like how it's being asked not necessarily who's asking. I've totally been offended by people of color who have asked. And I think there is an assumption too that all people of color have some analysis around racism, and I don't think that's true.

Although not necessarily in relation to the “what are you?” question, other mixed black women in the study talked about feeling dismissed by black women. Alana said, “Like I always thought that black women hate me. Even to this day it’s hard for me to connect and to be intimate with black women.” Brittney also later brought the topic up explaining,

You know I'm half black and half white. I don't hang around that much with just black people, just African-American, or whatever cause they kind of separate themselves from me. I've noticed that I get a little like, for me, I think black women that are full are against, or more against mixed races. Like, they don't like

when a black man dates a white woman. They get territorial, and they get offended. I think that's stupid. I have a couple, like, full African-American friends, but not that many. They kind of stick to themselves, it seems like that to me.

Joanna also said, "I'm always on guard in a group of black people." Ruth, who is 34, although now she has several black friends, as a youth was a complete outcast in her "99 percent black" school. Diana, who grew up two decades earlier in a predominately black neighborhood and moved in circles comprised mainly of black people, was an exception to this experience as she never raised the issue of being dismissed or rejected by black women.

The problem with focusing exclusively on the "what are you?" questions that mixed race people often face, as often happens in discussions of the mixed race experience, is that it only begins to scratch the surface of identity challenges and external constraints on self-identification. For many of these women identity challenges even occurred within their own families.

### **Even Family Members Pose Challenges**

Although it is difficult to face constant questioning of identity by strangers, it can be even more difficult to face identity challenges from family members, both immediate and extended. Maria exclaimed,

I think my biggest challenges have probably come from my family. In terms of like, I mean like my mom not really acknowledging, and my dad at times really struggling when I started really identifying as Chicana and got involved with Mecha<sup>9</sup>. My dad was saying something around like, "oh aren't you going to join, like, a German group?" I was just like, that's stupid. Like, it didn't even make sense. It was like really bizarre, and so I think that sometimes even my parents don't really know me, our experiences and how we identify and why, right?

Ana also talked about separation from her mom around her identity. She said,

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<sup>9</sup> Mecha stands for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán. It is a Chicano/Chicana student movement organization that has chapters in a large number of high schools, colleges, and universities.

I know there were times that my mom didn't really relate to me because she's white, and I'm brown. A few years ago I told my mom that I was a part of this organization for women of color, and she said to me, "do you think of yourself as a woman of color?" And I was like, "yeah, hello?" And it was just like this dawning on her mind like "Oh, what? I think that I know my daughter's brown," but like (loudly) "OH, she knows she's brown too!"

As mentioned in the previous chapter, for almost all the women mixed race identity was not discussed in their homes, and as a result many of the participants did not know how their parents perceived them.

Susan also talked about challenges to her identity by her white mom. Often they took place by way of her mom trying to control her appearance and squelch parts of Susan's identity that made Susan stand out as different from her white mother. For example, her mom always wanted her to straighten her hair. She tells this story:

My mom is the white one, and one thing that this made me think of is that she was always trying to make me look more white. My hair is very frizzy and curly; I have this big bush on my head. I just got it cut (lots of laughter from the group because her hair looked really straight). I have this really wiry kind of, whatever, and when I would come home from college, she would pick me up at the airport the first thing she would say is, "When are you going to straighten your hair?" And I remember just, like, being really upset, and I would complain to my little brother about it. And he would be like, "you so made that up! There's no way," you know? "That's ridiculous." And I said, "okay the next time you come to the airport." And he came to the airport and it happened, and his jaw dropped. Because as the boy, there was enough separation, I guess. The gender offers enough separation. My mom really saw me as an extension of her, and what wasn't white about me she really felt she had to address, she had to change.

Maria, Ana, and Susan all talked about a feeling of separation from their white moms because they identified as women of color. Sometimes the challenges or dismissive remarks that their white moms made were around issues of appearance or beauty – white beauty – as in the story above in which Susan's mom wants her to straighten her hair.

Maria also talked about how her mom made her feel ugly. She cried as she recalled, “then there was my mom who was like, well... I was like, ‘do you think I'm pretty?’ And she would be like, ‘well you're interesting looking.’” Although Maria currently has light skin, when she was younger she was darker (she showed me photos and there was an amazing difference in skin color), and her features resemble the Mexican women on the dad's side of her family, not her white mother. Maria's mom is an artist, and she remembered that when she was little her mom began a painting of her, but became frustrated with it. Maria remembered, “She just kept saying, ‘why I can't get your face right?’ And I remember getting it. And I was like ‘oh, it's because I'm so ugly, she can't paint me.’” Her mom never finished the painting.

Personally, I would describe Maria as beautiful – high cheekbones, a beautiful smile with full lips, soft long curly hair, petite – so it honestly surprised me that she received negative messages about her appearance growing up. I asked her, “you don't remember your mom telling you that you were pretty ever?” She replied,

No, and it doesn't mean she didn't, so I don't want to just create this. But I distinctly remember the messages I got when I wasn't. Clearly those outweighed whatever else she may or may not have said. So kind of like, in some ways it doesn't really matter.

Knowing that she looked nothing like her mom, Maria's feelings of inadequacy were exacerbated by the continual attention her dad gave her mom for her beauty. Maria said that her mom looked like a beauty queen, and that her dad daily remarked on her mom's beauty.

What does it mean to hear that your mom is beautiful when you don't look like your mom? I remember seeing those shows sometimes, those like pageant shows, the mother-daughter ones. They look the same almost, and it's this whole thing. I was just like, oh yeah, that's so not me.

She appreciated the fact that her mom and dad were still in love, and she expressed the desire to be with someone who, like her dad did with her mom, would tell her daily that she is beautiful. Although she feels that her dad told her she was beautiful, it was never to the extent that he admired her mom's white beauty. And because she looked nothing like her mom, she felt she could never live up to that standard of beauty. This affected her self-esteem; she was angry about the negative messages she received from her mom and remarked, "I'm fucking 34, and I don't think I'm beautiful. Like, when the fuck is that going to happen. And let me tell you, she didn't do much to help me get there, you know?" Thankfully, for Maria, she had extended family members whom she resembled and admired, her *Tata*<sup>10</sup> and her *tia*<sup>11</sup> both of whom told her she was beautiful.

Similarly Janet, who also has a white mom and a Mexican dad, received some messages from her mother about not looking beautiful, although it wasn't as clearly linked to race. However, her sense of not feeling beautiful overall was impacted by race dynamics because she was raised mostly in an all-white community with white standards of beauty. She explained that, "the women that had more value were definitely like blonde and blue eyed, and looked just like this kind of Barbie girl."

I definitely feel like the boys when I was growing up definitely thought that the girls with the blonde hair and the blue eyes were the prettiest. And I remember going through a phase where I wanted to be like them. I remember thinking I wish I had blonde hair and I wish I had blue eyes, and you know not really being happy with the way I looked.

I asked her if she talked to her mom about her feelings and experiences. She said,

I do remember talking to my mom about not being happy with the way I looked, but the only one thing I remember specifically, is saying that I was real unhappy with my nose, and that when I was older wanting a nose job. And I remember my

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<sup>10</sup> grandmother

<sup>11</sup> aunt

mom just kind of looking at me and rather than saying what I think she would say, like “You don’t need that,” or “No way.” You know? I think I remember her saying like, “Maybe when you’re older and we have enough money, you can get one.”

Again, I was surprised to hear her story. Janet is also someone who would most likely be described by many people as beautiful.

Alana, who also has a white mom, talked about a sense of separation from her mom as well, although it wasn’t connected to standards of beauty. Alana explained that she often tried to educate her white mom around issues of race in hopes of helping her to understand her experience as a mixed race black woman. However, these challenges often felt threatening to her mom. This feeling was exacerbated when Alana came out to her mom as queer. Alana recalled,

In the summer, I came out to her as a queer person. And we got into this huge fight, I remember, down near the beach. We were around all these white moms and white daughters walking along the beach. And my mom and I were standing kind of far away. Then she started screaming at me, “We are never going to be close because you are queer and black. We are never ever going to be close. And what am I my supposed to do?” I completely lost it. I started screaming and crying, and our relationship has never been the same ever since then.

Instead of reaching out to her, Alana’s mom got caught up in her own sense of dissonance from her daughter and added to it by focusing on their differences rather than connecting with Alana as her mom in a time when her daughter was searching for support. In contrast, Joanna and Katherine, the siblings whose black mom talked to them frequently about race, received clear, distinct messages from their mother that they were beautiful mixed race women.

Mindy, whose dad is white, felt a connection to her Filipina mother but her mother at times dismissed a connection to her daughter who she perceived primarily as white, which is part of the reason why Mindy felt like she could not claim a “woman of

color” identity. She shared, “It’s hard when your own mother says, ‘you’re your father’s daughter’ based on skin. And then you don’t really feel a connection to your father, it’s just one more thing, you know?” She added, “Even though I feel somewhat closer to my mother, there’s still like a distance that gets created because it’s like nothing of her is recognized in yourself.” Mindy struggled a lot with her identity because she was most often assumed to be white by strangers, and by even her mother and her extended Filipino family, yet she felt more of a connection to her Filipina mom and Filipino identity than she did to her white dad and white identity. This left her feeling there was no place for her.

Differences between the mixed race participants and their monoracial parents often came to the fore when participants were not recognized as their parent’s kids, sometimes in very painful ways. Marta told a story about one time when her dad came to her house to repair a door that didn’t work. She said,

And he had taken the door off and he was in the yard with the door, and this guy who lives downstairs came running out, and he ran over to me. And said “there is this guy in the yard and I don't know what he's doing. I don't know if he's trying to break in." And I just looked at him and I said, “that's my father.” And he just looked like he wanted to die. And he just said, “oh I’m so sorry” and ran away.

Although Marta has very similar features to her Peruvian father, people were often unable to recognize the similarities between them because of their different skin tones, her dad’s being brown and hers being white. Racism also played into the situation as people assumed that a brown man would be stealing.

Bobbi also had experiences in which she wasn’t recognized as her mom’s daughter. She added,

I think that happens to me all the time, because my sister looks a lot different. My mom is a very fair blonde, blue-eyed, white woman. But the time it sticks out the



most is when we were in, my sister married a bohemian man, and we were in the Bahamas. And we were in this place where all the women make these cool doodads out of straw; it was this marketplace. And the tourists there treat the locals like shit. And this tourist lady asked my mom, “where did you get your purse?” because she had just gotten it from the straw people. And my mom was like, I don't know. And I was like, “oh she got it over there,” like I'm telling her where my mom got it. And the lady just looked right through me. And the place was so packed that she was right here (indicates a space only inches away). And I was like, “oh she got it right there,” and she thought I was trying to hustle her. She's basically treating me like the locals, and I was trying to tell my mom, that bitch. And I was like “oh, I guess you don't hear me then,” you know? I told my mum and she was just like, she totally couldn't even recognize that something like that would be happening. It's so frustrating when you're like, “there's somebody who is really fucking with me and treating me like shit right now.” And your mom is just like (silence), you know, like, it's weird.

This instance began as a dismissal of identity by a stranger but in the end it illuminated the distinct and disparate positions between Bobbi and her mom. Her mom was unable to understand or validate Bobbi's experience with racism which positioned Bobbi as an outsider in relation to her mom.

Maria, Ana, Mindy, Janet also all told stories of not being recognized as their parents' kids. I too have had that experience. I remember people asking my mom if I was adopted. It happened so often that it wasn't until I was 10 and my sister, who looks just like me, was born that I was sure I was indeed my mom's child. These instances are reminders to us of outsider positionalities even within our own families.

At the same time, some of the women also recognized the ways their parents went out of their way to make connections. Ana said,

When I think about my mom and me, there are lots of things that I've experienced that she never has experienced. But she has worked really hard to try to stay connected to me, to learn about the things that are important to me.

Bobbi, who told the story of frustration with her mom above, also spoke very highly of her mom, stating that her white mom “speaks really good Somali” and emphasizing how

her mom taught her Somali culture. Even Maria recognized that her mom tried to protect her, for example from her grandfather's racist jokes. She said, "So I know my mom really tried, where she got it, to say stuff like that. I know that she did."

Some of the women also were made to feel outsiders by extended family as well, although there are also several stories of acceptance by extended family members. Eight of the women shared stories of their white grandparents not accepting their parents' relationship. Brittney shared a story of how a friend of hers told her that he couldn't date her because she was black. She stated that the negative things her friends or other people said didn't really bother her. Then she added, "The thing that affected me was my mom telling me about my grandma and how she was like that before. But I never noticed it because she never treated me different." Brittney's story is indicative of several of the women's experiences in which they learned later that their white grandparents' disapproved of their parents' marriage. Oftentimes they, as the mixed race children, were accepted, but sometimes their parents cut off contact with their extended families as a result of the disapproval and the women never got to know their grandparents. Mindy shared, "For a while there we had really limited contact with my grandmother because you know her attitude towards the marriage and everything was so negative."

Most of the women had a sense of being different within some or all extended family situations. Elizabeth talked about going to a recently immigrated aunt's house and feeling very different from the rest of the group. She said, "They treated me different. They gave me special food. My own special American food. I couldn't understand their language ... I felt so different." Mindy, who lived in Boston, talked about feeling disconnected from her Filipino family by language and culture and distance. Most of her

Filipino family lived on the west coast or in the Philippines. Mindy's mom made traditional Filipino food at home which has now become "comfort food" for Mindy, but there was still a language barrier and a cultural barrier. Mindy felt that she was seen by her Filipino family as "the American daughter" that her mother had. Mindy also perceived the white side of her family to be very different; interactions with her grandmother always "set [her] on edge." Janet recalled going to her dad's side of the family for Christmas and feeling out of place. She said,

And I have these memories of when I was younger going to like be on my father's side of the family, with like second and third cousins who are all brown, and like remember like Spanish, and I remember like it being Christmas, and them making tamales in the kitchen, and I remember just feeling like, kind of like an outsider then too, because I didn't really know even who these people were. And so I feel like that whole side of my family has always been like kind of very far away.

Some, like Ruth and Linda, had virtually no contact with extended family.

Other times being with extended family, especially extended family of color, was a place where the participants gained a closer connection to their culture. For example, both Tina and Susan, talk about their Mexican grandmothers reminding them that they are Mexican. Susan said that her identity "comes from [her] grandmother" more than it comes from her father. When she went to California to visit her family she would spend time cooking with her grandmother while her brothers went off "doing whatever."

During those times, Susan said,

My grandma used to very, very specifically say to me, in so many words, like exactly, "You are a Chicana." If somebody asks you, your answer is, "I am a Chicana." "That's what you are, you are mine, you belong to me," that was her thing.

Tina similarly remembers spending time with her grandmother and the large influence that had on her identity formation:

I would say when I was little, up until fifth grade, I really identified as Mexican. That's what I was. I spent all kinds of time with my dad's side of the family. My great grandma, I spent a lot of time with her. She didn't speak a word of English, and so I spent tons of time trying to communicate with her. It was very rare for me to eat hamburgers and hot dogs. I was just really eating tortillas and rice and beans all the time.

For Tina and Susan spending time with their Mexican grandmothers solidified their Latina identities.

Often home and family are thought of as places of belonging. For these women there were sometimes home spaces, immediate or extended, and particular family members that helped them to feel like they belonged, but often these women had experiences as outsiders even within family contexts. With constant identity challenges outside of the home, often these women were left with no safe space, as Janet said, "I think it's hard, because sometimes I feel like I don't really have a place. Where do I belong? That really comes up." However, it did appear to make a difference when their parents made an effort to understand their experiences, especially the white parent, with whom most of the participants felt most distant. Ana shared this 2001 journal entry she wrote that names this complex dynamic of wanting to be understood but appreciating the love that is displayed even if there isn't always understanding.

Mom asks if I see myself as a woman of color and I think about how my white mother cannot understand her brown children's lives, how I count brown faces when I walk into a room, but she does know what it means to be an outsider, to be different than those around the table, maybe she does know what it's like to look the same as the others around the table but to be different, her British whiteness at a table of Americans like my half-Filipino pan-brownness at a table of Latinas, I can fake it okay but it doesn't resonate or hum, I feel white to their brown, butch to their femme, bourgie to their ghetto, and yet I fit enough, am accepted enough, my mother does not understand me, my brownness, my queerness, but we love each other and it is enough.

Other women may not say that love is enough, but what Ana's mom did that not all parents did, was make a continual concerted effort to understand and support her daughter. For example, her mom became an active member in PFLAG when Ana came out to her and even though she was surprised when she heard Ana claim an identity as a woman of color, she didn't challenge it; she accepted it.

The women occupied insider and outsider positionalities in relationship to their family members. Maria, Susan, Ana, Alana, Janet, and Bobbi all felt some level of distance, disconnect, or discord with their white moms as mixed race daughters. Sometimes their moms emphasized their differences, and sometimes outsiders pointed out their differences. Mindy also felt distanced from her Filipina mom because her mom perceived Mindy to be white and more of her father's daughter. The women also found themselves in various ways to be outsiders with extended families. Sometimes there were language or cultural differences from family members of color. Other times there was an enforced distance from white family members because of racism. Conversely, for some of the women extended family members provided a sense of belonging and identity as evidenced in the relationships between Susan and Tina and their grandmothers. Overall there was much more emphasis on the women in their lives – moms and grandmothers- than other family members. Although, several women did mention relationships with grandparents and uncles.

### **School and Friends**

Some of the women found refuge with their friends, but for the most part identity challenges and outsider feelings extended to school and peer networks. These started in grade school and extended all the way through college. There were several stories of

switching schools, desiring to drop out, and/or studying abroad to escape school atmosphere. In addition, this was highly educated group of woman who were generally very successful in school; most of them were in gifted classes which also created outsider positionalities.

### *Gifted Classes*

All of women did well in school overall, particularly when they weren't faced with overwhelming direct challenges by friends, teachers, or unrelated negative outside circumstances. Ten of the sixteen women – Maria, Ana, Linda, Marta, Diana, Ruth, Joanna, Elizabeth, Susan, Bobbi, and Mindy – talked about being in upper level and/or gifted classes. Although others did not discuss gifted classes, per se, all the other participants explicitly stated that they were “smart” and/or that they did well in school. For many, not only did they do well, but they were at the top of their class and were afforded special privileges. For example, Maria and Ruth were both valedictorians, Ruth skipped the first grade, Elizabeth spent her senior year of high school at a university, and Diana was known as “the smart kid” in the neighborhood and got 100% on the Howard University entrance exam. As I was conducting interviews, I was struck by the overwhelming success these women experienced in school. They were highly formally educated. However, being academically gifted/successful often placed them in predominately white spaces, separating them from other people of color. For example Maria, Ana, Linda, and Joanna talked about how even though their schools were racially diverse, their classes weren't. Maria said, “I was placed in gifted classes so I was always, there was always some sort of separation.” Diana and Ruth both attended predominately black high schools but their honors classes were comprised of almost all white students.

### *Challenges by Teachers and the Institution*

Even though they were all self-proclaimed “smart” women and overall did very well in school, they also faced several challenges. Some of these challenges came from the teachers and the institutions of school. For example, upon starting school Maria and Marta were both placed in inappropriate classes because of their Spanish surnames. In first grade Marta was, “tracked into a slower reading group because her last name is Rodriguez.” Maria had a similar experience. She said, “I was put in an ESL class in kindergarten because I was actually really quiet and they thought that that must mean that I didn't speak English.” Bobbi explained that racist teachers “put [her] in all remedial classes.” She believed their decisions were based on assumptions about her because of the neighborhood she was from. Brittney, of all the women, appeared to struggle most in school. She was held back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and was placed in special education in one high school. She moved to a more diverse school and tested again and found not to need special education. Her senior year she had a “3.7 or 3.8” grade point average.

Diana experienced her greatest challenges to excelling as a student from the institution of school. Although she was in gifted classes and recognized as smart, she was not aided by any teachers to apply for college. Diana did not know anyone who went to college, and her family did not know to encourage her to apply. She recognized her senior year that all the white Jewish kids around her were applying for college so she decided to visit the guidance counselor to ask how to apply. However, she explained, she got no support.

I went to the guidance counselor and told her, "I wanted to know about going to college," and she said to me, "Oh no, Diana, colored kids don't go to college." She starts writing and gave me this slip of paper and she said, "This is the vocational school. You can go there and take up sewing. That's what you should

do" I instantly knew this was wrong, because in the eighth grade we had to take sewing and that was the only class I ever had in my life where I had less than an A or B. I got a D in sewing, and I was completely humiliated at having to wear this home-made dress in a fashion show on the school stage.

Fortunately, the "lady next door" came by and told her and her mom about a test at Howard that weekend. She went and took the test, scoring 100% and earning a full scholarship.

Many of the women also talked about the limitations of how they were allowed to identify on school forms. They were frustrated by the fact that they were forced to choose only one identity. These institutional challenges were compounded by harassment by peers, both white peers and peers of color.

#### *Suffocating in Predominately White Schools and Harassment by Peers of Color*

For many of these women, experiences in K through 12 schools included many challenges by peers to their identities as mixed race females. Several women shared stories of feeling out of place in predominately white spaces. Two of the women – Janet, and Bobbi – actually changed schools to escape their predominately white peers. Janet explained,

One of the little things I forgot to bring up is that...well, it's kind of a big thing, because it was another transition growing up, but most of the people that I went to grade school with, we all ended up going to the same high school, and it was just right up the street from where my parents lived and still live. And again it was mostly white teenagers and I was there for two years, and I just couldn't take it anymore. Like I think part of that is like the comments that were made to me, like people calling me the Mexican girl, and part of that just being that it was also a lot of...and this is Catholic school too. So that's another thing. So I went to Catholic school growing up from K through 12. So you know there's like white, Christian, rich teens there, and so there is a lot of privilege going on and I just, yeah, I just couldn't really, I couldn't handle the way that people were treating other people... Just like mean things that people would do to each other. So I convinced my parents to let me go to a different high school, because I had already started hanging out with people at this other Catholic high school, that was also on the Kansas side, and there were a lot of white students, but I'd say about a third of the



students were Latinos, because it was just in a different neighborhood where there were just more brown people living around there, and it was closer to the state line. And it wasn't so far deep into the suburbs, so it was definitely just more mixed. And I definitely felt more comfortable there. And there were still like the cliques going on but people were definitely just more laid back, and I think about that kind of environment, when you get all these people together that are so alike, and they look so alike, then you have a few different people in there, it creates a very like fearful and like hateful environment I think. And also what people are going through at that age too, like combined with that kind of environment where everyone looks the same. And so I think that was part of that, and so I definitely felt more comfortable when I went to this other school even though, it was also like Catholic, and it was also coed. It was just a 15 minute drive away, it was just so different, because of the people who made up the school.

Janet described that time as “the hardest time in [her] life.” Bobbi also explained that she chose to go to a different school and leave her predominately white school. Her school was racist so she “went a little bit more central where it was more diverse.”

Ruth, Maria, and Alana all had the desire to do so but never actually changed schools. As described in an earlier chapter, Maria had a very difficult time when she moved from her predominately brown public school to a predominately white Catholic school. Drinking became her form of escape and she sought validation from men. She explained,

I drank so much in high school. Because I would get really drunk, and then I would make out with someone, just crazy. I mean I have crazy stories where I would be like, “who the fuck drink my bottle of vodka?” and people would be like, “you did.” So I think I had a lot going on. I don't think I had the language to process it, so that was what I did. Because there was always processing. It was just a sense of just never feeling, again it was race, it was body, it was uhm (silence). I think I was really good at just being able to look like I belonged to this other group and not feeling inside that I really did. Which I'm sure everybody has that feeling, we're all trying to fake it.

Maria is referring to trying to fit in. She had the capacity to make herself look like she belonged to a group but she never felt inside that she did. Alcohol became a way for her to fit in and forget.

Alana also struggled significantly in her all white high school and similarly turned to alcohol as escape and men for validation. She explained,

Well, I did well in school until I got into high school. I started to do poorly my sophomore year. I went to class high every day. So I think that was definitely key, but I really think it just has to do with just incredibly low self-esteem, you know? It really plummeted when I got into high school. I just had horrible self-esteem. I really think a lot of it had to do with just feeling really inferior like around whiteness, in whiteness. It makes so much sense to me now where that was coming from all of a sudden. And why, in high school I think that you really do come into your identity around then, and how I wasn't coming in to that white identity and wasn't receiving that privilege in the way that all my friends were, you know, in terms of the counselors in school. Even though I had access – I could've taken the Kaplan review, I could've had all those resources that a lot of my friends did. For whatever reason I had low self-esteem, and at that point I was having really severe anxiety issues. I have intense school anxiety. Actually in terms of what we been talking about in terms of mixed identity, I really think that I was traumatized by being in a white school. I just had horrible self-esteem. I really think a lot of it had to do with just feeling really inferior like around whiteness, in whiteness.

There were a few people of color that she could have tried to befriend in school, but internalized racism prevented her from doing so. When I asked her why she didn't want to associate with people of color in her school, with shame, she explained,

It wasn't conscious. It was just internalized stuff. It was about me not wanting to be associated with people of color, you know? And me wanting to be really associated with white folk. God, I'm like so embarrassed to talk about the stuff. But I really think that I was embarrassed to be associated with anything around black culture or blackness specifically because of my own association with it, you know? Feeling like black people were ugly and this, that, and the other thing, and I didn't want white people to associate me with that. I'll feel like, especially a lot of white folks said racist things, you know, growing up. And me always knowing that I would be associated with that. And at that point because I was mixed, and because I lived in a liberal space, then I could choose if I wanted to hang out with all white people, and I chose to do that. And there were definitely a handful of mixed people like myself who also chose that. I became more open to it when I was in my senior year in high school.

Instead of identifying with her black peers, Alana kept trying to fit in with her white peers and struggled with her femininity as a black woman in an all white space.

To prove herself, she constantly sought validation from white men.

I would say that my sexuality was pretty much based on getting affirmation from white men. So with all these men I dated I don't think I ever really enjoyed having sex with men, I think it was really about getting affirmation from them...I dated mostly men who were 10 to 15 years older than me. So is very much about being sort of young exotic pretty thing, that they could take out and buy stuff for, and do that. (p. 18)

Often, once she had sex, she was “treated like shit” by the men she dated.

In addition, Alana also suffered from much sexual harassment. Besides feeling isolated as a black mixed race woman in an all-white space, another reason why she began to do poorly in high school is because she was assaulted by a white man her freshman year. She remembered,

You know what? There is something. I guess my freshman year in high school I was accosted and molested by a man that I babysat for two years. But uhm, yeah, then I think I just felt profoundly isolated. I started to have a lot of emotional issues and my friends didn't know how to deal. It's hard, you know I was 16. So I pretty much just medicated and went numb until I graduated. I barely graduated.

Unfortunately, this was one of many negative experiences she had with men; she was sexualized and harassed repeatedly from a young age. She explained,

It started when I was really young. I remember just being followed home when I was walking to school and walking to my house. It became so normal for me, and it started when I was probably like in seventh grade, like maybe like 12. And I know that other women deal with this, but I think there's something specific about being a light skinned black woman, and also looking Latina as well. And it wasn't just white men. It was like Latino men and it was black men, but it was mostly white men just because I lived in Santa Monica and it was mostly white men there. They would say things. I mean like really derogatory shit about blow jobs. I've had men jack off in front of me. That was pretty normal. Like, I was solicited a lot for prostitution especially when I was walking from high school to my house, which is a few blocks away. The section of the street that I lived on at the time was where black women were who were sex workers; they were on that strip. I would be wearing a hoody and jeans and my backpack. It was very obvious that I was a high school student coming home from school, and they would follow me home and asked me if I wanted to trick. And it became so normalized.

After hearing that story I said, “That's intense. That's not most people's experiences.”

Alana responded,

Maybe, I just assumed it was. But the thing is that it wasn't for all of my white Jewish friends, none of them got that attention. And I also got a lot of attention from my friends' dads and their brothers. It was just always something that like I was very aware of from a very young age, that I was viewed as a sexual object. My white friends were coming into puberty as well and they weren't getting that same kind of attention. It was something very specific about being a brown woman that I was getting that attention, you know?

Although young women can experience harassment in any town and any school, Alana experienced a very specific racialized form of sexual harassment from strangers as well as acquaintances. Her double subordinate positionality as a brown woman made her vulnerable to continual harassment by white men. That harassment, coupled with the sense of inferiority she already felt as a black person in a predominately white space, made her schooling experience hardly bearable. To cope she “medicated and went numb.”

Another reason there was a large shift in her experience of school from grade school to high school is because she shifted from being in an alternative school to a regular public school. Alana harbors anger at her mother for removing her from her alternative school, “one of the free schools” that was part of the free school movement, and placing her in the public school. The school was a K through 12 school, but her mom removed her from it and sent her to public school. Although her alternative school was predominately white and middle class, she did not feel isolated like she did in public school. This is how she described the freedom school:

I think it was kind of a thing that happened in the 70s, 60s, you know where they start all these alternative schools that deviate from traditional education; students were more empowered through, uhm, like they had more freedom in the classroom I guess. I don't know if came from Freirian approach to education but I

feel like they kind of got that. Definitely more of a personalized relationship with teachers and faculty. I called all my teachers by their first names, small school, we went to their houses on the weekends. There was definitely a much stronger emphasis in heart than in academics and, uhm, we weren't punished and surveyed in the ways traditional schools are. We would have more dialogue, I guess. And it was started by Jane Fonda and some other hippies.

Moving from that school where it was personalized and there were no grades, only evaluations, to another school in which there were many rules, restrictions, and guidelines was "traumatic." For a myriad of reasons – changing from an alternative school to a public school, being a brown girl in a predominately white space, being unable to live up to ideals of white feminine beauty, and being repeatedly harassed – Alana was positioned as an outsider in school and among her peers.

Maria also had stories of sexual harassment interspersed in her stories of growing up. Only one other woman talked specifically about sexual harassment, Brittney, who was raped in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and ended up in the hospital after a subsequent suicide attempt. However, I did not ask about sexual harassment specifically so the numbers may be much higher. Regardless, the impact of sexual harassment cannot be underestimated, and we must recognize that these stories of sexual harassment are completely intertwined with dynamics of racism in ways that are unique to their experiences of belonging and being hyper sexualized and exoticized as mixed race women.

Ruth was also physically harassed in school. Her experience was distinct in that the majority of her harassment came from black people. She explained that grade school was "kind of living hell." Her white mom worked in her predominately black school and she was not accepted by the other kids. Her only friends were other students who were "outcasts ... the white girl, the fat girl, and the burn- fire survivor." Ruth said, "My teachers liked me" but her classmates refused to accept her. She explained that in high

school she had a “really hard time.” She said, “I got teased a lot about not being black enough – I talk like I’m white.” I asked Ruth to explain that more and she said they weren’t used to “punk rocker black girls” and explained that she had white, Filipino and Asian friends and friends “with Mohawks and combat boots.” She had no black friends and “didn’t listen to the right music;” she listened to the cure. In addition, she said, “hair was a big deal,” and she refused to straighten her hair. Consequently, she said, “everybody was telling me, ‘you need to relax your hair. You need to do something with that mess.’” Ruth, however, never gave in. She said, “My thought was, ‘who in the hell are you? Mind your own damn business. I can handle it.’” The worst incident of harassment was in high school. Ruth explained. “This group of people decided to throw me on the ground. I was just walking, here are these people, and then all of a sudden I’m on my stomach with my arms in front of me and my books sort of spread all the way down the hall.” Ruth, however, did what she could to claim agency in that situation. She said,

I jumped up and I chased whatever guy I could - I just chased this guy, chased him all the way up to the top floor of the school and I grabbed him by the shirt and he turned around. I thought I knew who it was and I looked at him and I thought, “I’ve never seen you in my life. I don’t even know you” I think I said. “I don’t even know you.” I just let him go and I just went back downstairs and I took my books and I went outside to the car. I started crying because I just didn’t understand how people could have such hatred for – these people even weren’t recognizable to me, but I was obviously recognizable to them and worthy of – to me, I saw it as a violent thing.

She also exercised her right to stay. She said, “It was really bad. Really bad. I thought about transferring but I stayed because I didn’t want to let them win. So I stayed and I got through it, but it was really difficult.”

Unlike Alana and Maria, Ruth did not turn to drugs and she did not try to conform. In fact at the end of the second interview, when I asked her if there was anything she wanted to add in relation to school she said, “I’m proud that I stayed true to myself the whole time. I didn’t try to do anything to fit better. Instead I thought, ‘they’re stupid.’ I never turned it on myself as far as I was doing something wrong.” I asked her what helped her keep that perspective and she said, “I don’t know.” Even her mom said to her that she wished she could be as strong as her.

Ruth made it seem like she was born with the instinct to fight for herself. She started that way from the time she was born being in spaces where people didn’t necessarily want her. She explained that her mom didn’t know she was pregnant until Ruth was born. She collapsed at work, they took her to the hospital. The doctors told her she was pregnant, and “They had to induce labor right then and [Ruth] was born like two pounds, like two and a half pounds and two months early.” Her parents didn’t know what to do with her. Her father expected the mom to raise her. Her mom didn’t know what to do so she gave her to the neighbors for a month before deciding to take her back and raise her.

Thus, Ruth has a history of fighting for her life and experiencing displacement from the moment she was born. However, she also had teachers who encouraged and supported her. She explained that teachers liked her and encouraged her to do well. It wasn’t until college that she encountered teachers who were not supportive. She said,

I hated undergrad, it was a racist institution. The professors had low expectations. They assumed I got there on a sports scholarship and asked, ‘how did you get here?’ I applied. Professors weren’t good to me.

She finally found a place where she felt at home when she went to graduate school at Northeastern. “For the first time in my life I didn’t have to think about race,” she said. The student body was diverse with a lot of foreign born students who were working adults. The classes were small and students were friends with the professors.

Like Ruth, in grade school Susan also suffered from peer harassment but had wonderful teachers. She explained that since grade school she felt like an outsider among her blond peers in rural Minnesota. Although she is quite fair skinned, she has dark hair and brown eyes. She said,

I grew up in Minnesota. And it was, and it was so, I was really dark, like it was so blonde. It wasn't just like white people, its just blond people. So I used to have kids come up to me on the playground and say, why are you so dark? Are you black? That kind of thing, because it was that blonde. So, it was like living in Norway you know?

Even though she was challenged by peers on her identity, she was “happy” and “loved school” because she was “favored by teachers.” She stated, “We happen to be quite an intelligent family and we excelled and we had a lot of encouragement.” Susan explained that there were no other Latinos in her town so it was as if there was no opportunity yet for the teachers to experience bias. Although there was bussing in her school, there were no students of color in her accelerated classes. She got along fine with her peers until freshman year when, she said,

We [Susan and her brother] sort of all of a sudden became spics, so you know people ever since you were little, but all of a sudden they think it matters. So all of a sudden my group – not even people in the hall passing, like people in my group of friends all of a sudden they would just call me spic. Like that was it. And I just wasn’t their friend any more.

Luckily, her best friend was a 6’4’ guy who told her harassers to leave her alone; so they did. But, Susan remained distant from others from that day on and didn’t trust the



majority of her peers. To escape, she spent her senior year in Turkey. In Turkey, she was often mistaken to be Turkish and often experienced more of an insider positionality than she did within her high school in the United States. Her coping strategy was to remove herself from the structure of her schooling situation and immerse herself in an entirely different culture.

Tina, who is very fair skinned, but as a young child identified strongly with her Mexican heritage and culture, had the experience of being rejected by peers. Like Ruth, she was rejected by students of color, the Mexican kids in her elementary school. She said,

When I was younger, I felt like I looked a lot like my family members. So that made me feel like I was identifying more as Mexican. I was always around Spanish speakers, but I don't know any Spanish. When I was growing up, I felt like that was my culture. That's how I grew to know myself and identify.

But when she went to school she tried to hang out with the Mexican kids and was shunned. She said,

Yeah, so when I got into 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade I starting realizing that, wow, I can't hang out with the Mexican kids, I really wanted to. They reminded me of my family and my cousins. I'm really one of you. It didn't work really. So... I was friends with them sometimes, but especially when I got into high school, barriers got dropped, but I think they thought I was trying too hard. They really like, felt like I constantly had to validate myself. My family's from Mexico. I know what it's like. You know? I don't know. It was sort of silly.

Since she had difficulty connecting with people based on race, she began to find new ways to identify and connect with people that had nothing to do with race. She said,

So I think after I was, from probably fifth grade on up to end of high school, I started thinking of other ways that I identified. I was a roller skater for awhile. And that was like it – I was like a roller skater. And then in high school I became really political and a feminist. And that was me – I was a feminist, and I was political.

However, since leaving high school she has been involved in a process of continually examining her identity as a mixed race Mexican woman. She says “not a day goes by that I don’t think about what it means to be biracial.” Still her strategy to cope with her outsider racial positionality was to create other social positionalities.

### *Latinas and Language*

Tina felt that not speaking Spanish was the largest barrier to not being accepted by her Mexican peers. She explained that “colonialism” and “racism” were influencing factors as to why she did not speak Spanish because when her grandparents moved to California they were told outright that their children could not speak Spanish in school. In order to help their children succeed, they stopped speaking Spanish at home. As a result her dad and his siblings don’t know Spanish, and therefore neither did Tina. She says,

I always wonder what it would have been like for me if, if the Fremont school district wasn’t so racist and they allowed kids to speak Spanish. What would that have been like for my family? I always have this nagging part of me that says you’re biracial sure, but you’re also Mexican and that’s something you really should really invest your identity in. It’s the part of you that grew up with and that’s who you are.

Language held a prominent place as a marker of being included or excluded for the Latina participants.

Maria also talked about her anger at not being taught Spanish and her struggles to learn Spanish throughout her life. Although she too recognized that the reason Spanish was not passed down to her is related to the history of colonialism. Her dad was forced to attend “Americanization” schools as a child in which he was not allowed to speak Spanish. In fact, she harbored more resentment against her mom for not teaching her Spanish. Maria continued to find ways to strengthen her Spanish.

Marta, who was never taught Spanish, also talked about language issues. She recognized that speaking Spanish was often at the top of the list in being accepted within Latino communities. She said,

I just had so many issues about being light skinned and not speaking Spanish, cause one of the litmus tests I think for being Latina, the first question is do you speak Spanish? You don't speak Spanish! Even if you lightly speak Spanish, it's okay. But if you don't speak Spanish, it's like, you know, who raised you? You know, forget it. So it's always been a little bit problematic for me to find Latino community.

Janet also had on the top of her list of things to do to "learn Spanish" and dealt with challenges not knowing the language. Both Marta and Janet have been involved in creating film in Spanish, even though their Spanish language skills are not that strong.

Susan also attempted to learn Spanish at times although she said, "right now it's in horrible disrepair." Even though Spanish was her grandparents' first language, they only spoke English to their kids to "give their kids an advantage." Consequently, her dad doesn't speak Spanish. Susan studied Spanish in high school and college, spent some time in Spain and in Mexico. She has extra difficulty maintaining language however because when she was living in Turkey her senior year of high school she was hit by a car and suffered brain damage that's "very localized, just with language."

### *Outsider Positionalities*

Although Linda did not specifically speak of challenges to her identity by peers or school personnel, she strongly identified herself as an "outsider" in general. She did well in school and had a mixed group of friends including several biracial friends. Still, despite not having many identity challenges in school, Linda identified primarily as an outsider. In fact, she explained, she has been recently doing lots of spiritual work around that and her healer told her, "you've always place yourself on the outside, because it's

familiar and it's convenient. And it's also position of power to be on the outside.”

Because of this healing journey she was involved in, Linda had a strong analysis of her outsider positionality. She talked more about her positionality as an outsider in more recent peer spaces, within her family, and at work then she did in relation to school.

As evidenced by all these stories, virtually everyone had challenges to their identities and outsider positionalities in relation to school or peers or both. The only person in the group who did not talk about negative experiences in school related to race was Ana. She attended a magnet school and had a diverse group of friends including a friends who were mixed race. Her best friend was Filipino “so there was a nice reinforcement of that culture.” She said,

It was fun. My friends were there. I did well in school. I got to do extra stuff in school because I finished that unit. I had teachers who were of color and who weren't of color ... It had multicultural stuff. I remember we weren't all white. We did an identity unit in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, who am I? We had to reflect on who we were. Racially, it was fine. Sexual orientation and being a girl, there were memories around that.

Because of the diversity among the students and staff, and because Ana did well in school, race was not much of an issue. Instead for Ana the bigger deal was “sexual orientation and being a girl.” She was a tomboy and came out her sophomore year in college. Others – Marta, Mindy, and Joanna – also had challenges as tomboys. Mindy was another participant who did not talk much about racial challenges in school. Like Ana, she went to a diverse school. At several points in the interviews she specifically mentioned that she feels grateful for having been raised in a community of diverse people. She said, “If I grew up in Needham (the all white community her dad was from) it would have been more damaging. I don't understand how I look, but I didn't turn that in on me.”

For many of these women, these challenges to identity continued in college as they struggled to find community, insert themselves in communities of color, battle predominately white spaces, and deal with racist professors and institutions. As the women battled challenges to identity by peers and racism from teachers, they employed a variety of coping mechanisms, some positive, some negative. Amazingly, despite the challenges they faced, all but one of the participants succeeded in graduating from college and many went on to graduate school. Brittney, the only woman without her bachelor's degree, had attended beauty school but dropped out when she was only a few credits shy of graduating because of sexual harassment. She is young, 26, and still maintains a desire to complete school. These women displayed amazing resilience in the face of barriers to claiming space within schools. Unfortunately, upon leaving school, many of the women continued to face challenges to their identities within the work world.

## **Work**

Although the women struggled with outsider positionalities at work and faced challenges to their identity, there were fewer stories of identity struggles at work than at school. Several of the stories of struggles at work related to dealing with racism in the workplace. Ruth, for example stated, "Even as an adult I was accused of stealing twice at a job that I had at a hospital and it was just unbelievable to me. I was accused of stealing a video camera, which, to me, is horrible. I would never." There were also a few stories, of dealing with being recognized as women of color in ways that sometimes felt uncomfortable. Jobs also sometimes provided opportunities for the women to explore issues of racial identity.

Linda, for example, recalled how activities she was asked to engage in at a nonprofit she worked for allowed her to think more deeply about her identity as a mixed race woman. She worked for an educational reform non-profit that had professional development program on Fridays. One of the activities was about equity. In the first exercise they were told, “I want the white people to talk for five minutes and I want the people of color to talk for 10 minutes.” However, as Linda recalled, “Of course that did not happen.” She also said that they did many activities where they were asked to tell their own stories. There was one in which they were instructed to, “draw a representation of your life in art form, what does the roadmap to life look like?” They were also told to explain how their racial identity was formed and what influenced it. Linda, who described this as a turning point, said,

That was the first time that I really articulated stuff like the BSU [Black Student Union] and having the black dad and growing up in Bayview and stuff like my relationship with my dad, and maybe even potentially hating my own whiteness, my own self-hatred, and all that stuff, for the first time. So that I think was really key in my identity formation or articulating my identity.

Linda had since left that organization and at the time of the interview was working for a non-profit that was by and for people of color. She talked about how she had some trepidation about taking the job as a mixed race woman. Linda asked her employers how they felt about hiring her since she was part white and they told her that it was fine because she identified herself as a person of color. This positionality makes her very conscious of the ways that she takes up space at work. She explained,

When I first started at my job I was really ultra hypersensitive to the fact that I'm usually the first person to talk. We do things in a collective so at all of our meetings you would say what you think about this issue. And I would say will I think blah, blah, blah. Then I started to be super conscious about it. I was like, why am I always the first person to talk? Is that my white privilege? Why am I always the first person to talk? I'm really wanting to work that shit out.

Although she enjoys her job and appreciates the opportunity she is given, Linda realizes that she needs to make an extra effort to make sure that her potential white cultural ways of being are not impeding others.

Ana also talked about being identified by employers as a person of color.

However, she felt that she wasn't always recognized as a person of color. She tells this story of experiences at a few workplaces:

Well, like I work for this organization where every so often we have to turn in a chart to show how many people color we have in the organization and I know they count me, as I would want them to. But I think that in our day-to-day interactions they would forget that I'm a person of color. I worked in DC and it's a very black and white world there and it was a mostly white organization and I remember when we were hiring people would be like why can't we find qualified black candidates who want to take the job. And at some point occurred to me that we were looking for somebody who has a particular skin color but thinks the next the same way as everybody else in the organization. And that's why you can find a fit, because people want to be able to come in and be all of themselves and have their opinions valued and I don't think before creating a space within the organization. And I don't know if, I mean I just kind of felt like I was treated like any other white employee. Which in terms of, if I think about being treated with respect and dignity like everybody else in the organization that's great, and I don't think for me there was denial about my culture but I don't think there was that much interest in my culture. We have another Asian woman who's all Japanese, and an experience she has with one of my colleagues that I was really close with, I was close with both of them, and in this white colleague made some off-the-cuff joke about her last name, and her last name was so - soh, which is a Japanese name. And she made some comment about her being so-so in a certain area or something. And I just remember being really shocked, because I was like oh I love this person like my surrogate mom, and we've talked about a lot of different kinds of stuff, like my family not accepting the gay relationship and all that, and yet she would say something like that. She totally forgot that there's an Asian person at the table. If I had been in the room would she have totally forgotten. I didn't say anything because I wasn't a part of the whole conversation. I can't remember whether or not my friend spoke up.

Maria talked about frustrations with her work doubting her abilities. She explained that she conducts presentations in Spanish for her job. However, when they

needed someone to read something in Spanish for a video that was being created by coworkers, they overlooked her.

Diana talked about how there are specific cultural ways of being that are expected at work. She elaborated,

You have a professional façade, your public façade, and your real self. And you have to know which hat to put on in different situations if you're going to survive, like in the business world. There is a certain culture where you work, how you're supposed to behave. You need to pick up those clues and get with it if you want to work here. If you can't, you know get with that each move on. Because no matter what validity you have in your response in your way of delivering information for your research, whatever it is if it isn't the white way, it isn't right. You are incompetent.

Diana found that she needed to cater to the white institutional norms of the places where she worked.

Others found ways to express their identities more fully at work. For example, Maria purposefully wrote grants that required presentations in Spanish so that she would have to work on her Spanish as a result. Janet created a video that would be available in both Spanish and English, allowing her to do work that connected to her Latino community. Tina, as a waitress, spent the majority of her time talking to the Latino bussers and cooks rather than her white coworkers. Thus work became a space of both opportunity and challenge in relation to the formation of mixed race identity for these women.

### **Comfortable Spaces**

In the course of the interviews, I asked each participant, “Are there spaces in which you feel more comfortable or spaces you feel less comfortable?” Because of the nature of the interview the women understood that this question related to race, but they were also told that their responses could be broader. All of the women at some point



talked about feeling comfortable in spaces with other mixed race people, a topic that will be addressed in the next chapter. In addition, many of the participants – Susan, Katherine, Joanna, Marta – named being in diverse or eclectic groups as a place of comfort. Joanna, for example, said,

A big part to me is never fully feeling I belong to a group unless the group is already eclectic, certainly racially. The group I feel most comfortable with is a group that is racially diverse and has similar race politics.”

As exemplified in the quote by Elizabeth at the chapter opening, many of the women found refuge with others who were bicultural in some way whether mixed race, raised in a community in which they were different, born in another country, or a child of immigrants. Mindy said, “I find myself connecting more with people who were bi-cultural in some way. Like I had one friend who was Palestinian and she grew up in Britain.” Bobbi similarly said, “I like being around people from different countries.” Linda said she wanted to “be with people that have a shared sense of what it is like to grow up and not really fit with others.” Many of the women explicitly stated that they were not comfortable in all white groups. Joanna said, “I feel 99% of the time out of place in a group of white people.” Others said they were not comfortable in any kind of homogeneous group. Elizabeth said,

I feel less comfortable with anyone who is way, way, way the stereotype of whatever that race is, or perform their race obviously. Like in DC, they were so white. They dressed so white and it was uncomfortable. I just felt like I could not be accepted by those people. I feel uncomfortable if I’m with black people, and I’m the only person there who’s not black, if they talk about cultural things that I don’t know anything about.

Several of them added other non-race-related attributes that they appreciated in others including a “progressive” (Joanna, Katherine), “open-minded” (Bobbi, Joanna), “Democrat” or “not Republican” or “liberal” (Joanna, Katherine, Ruth), “college

educated” (Ruth, Joanna, Diana), “creative” (Ruth), and “queer” (Ruth, Joanna, Marta, Maria, Alana). Most of these attributes imply an acceptance or understanding of difference. A common denominator in the majority of these comfortable spaces is that they imply either an eclectic, diverse group – some kind of mixture, either embodied or as a collective group – or, as Linda described, people that have a shared sense of what it means to not fit in with others.

## **Conclusion**

These stories illuminate lives filled with constant challenges to identity for these women. The women were forced to navigate structures and settings that rejected their existence as biracial individuals. For many of these women, they were positioned as outsiders by people in all areas of their lives.

Virtually all of the women had to manage personal questions from strangers about their racial identities. There are few important points that can be gleaned from their stories of interactions with strangers. First, is that most often it was white people who assumed they were white. In addition, we learn from Joanna that most specifically it is white people who have been sheltered from interacting with mixed race people who tended to be the least likely to understand her experiences, and most likely the experiences of mixed race people in general. Thus, as we already know from years of research and writing about race politics, their stories confirm that white people who have more diverse experiences are more likely to be more sensitive to the complexity of the racial dynamics, in this case related to mixed race women (Bonvilla-Silva, 2006). Second, participants encountered white people who wanted to suppress the participants’ mixed race identities. Several of the women dealt with defensiveness from white people

when they claimed to be “something other than white” (Diana). There were two named intertwined factors involved in this reaction – (white) entitlement and (white) racism. Consequently, it would seem that the more that white entitlement and white racism is addressed generally, the more at peace mixed race people will be in the presence of white people. Third, there was a distinct dynamic of fear, judgment, and mistrust between black/white mixed race participants and black people who do not consider themselves mixed. All but one of the mixed black participants experienced and feared judgment and exclusion by black people who were not mixed. Diana, the one woman who did not share such experiences, was raised in the era of the “one drop rule” so she was considered black by all those around her, and she considered herself black which minimized separation between herself and her black peers. However, that “one drop rule” is no longer popular; the rules have changed and along with it so have racial politics. The opportunity to choose distinct, more complex identities has created divisions between black people who don’t see themselves as mixed and black people who claim a mixed identity. Due to the ways mixed race racial politics have been used to deny resources to black people, this animosity and distrust is understandable (for more information see Williams, 2006). Nonetheless, it creates an atmosphere in which often it is difficult for mixed black women to connect with other black women. As I probed about what these challenges meant, there was an overarching theme in the responses from the women about what they desired that essentially boils down to the wish that others will listen and learn. As Diana said in a discussion about white people who don’t get it, “They just don’t listen and learn!” In response to that comment, Susan recommended a book. She said,

One of the things that I suggest is that book called *White Like Me*. It's written by this white activist. It's for a white audience. It's about how you benefit from white power. And it breaks it down for use in path of understanding, like how you benefit from white power. And it breaks it down for you so you have some understanding. And the one thing he says is believe people when they tell you their story, and their experience.

Thus, two things people can do to be more sensitive around the needs and experiences of mixed race people are 1) take the initiative to educate themselves, and 2) listen to the stories and experiences of mixed race people without disbelief.

Unfortunately, judgment by strangers often paled in comparison to the effects of challenges to identity that these women experienced within their own families. A few things stand out in relation to insider/outsider positionality stories related to families. First, the women had to battle racism within their own families. Several of them had extended family members who were racist. It was painful for them to know, for example, that their grandparents disapproved of their parents' relationship and consequently their existence as mixed race individuals. Second, the women were sometimes judged and challenged by their parents about the ways they chose to identify racially and the race-based groups they became involved in. Although often the challenges often came from a place of fear by the parent that their child was dismissing a parent (either themselves or their spouse), in essence the disapproval is what created the discord not the initial involvement in a monoracial organization. Third, there were painful stories of disconnection from, most specifically, white moms. There were two main themes related to this disconnect. One was the white mother's inability to understand her child's experiences with race issues and racism. The other was the mother's vocalized disapproval of her daughter's looks, which for the women was interpreted as directly related to being mixed race, rather than monoracially white. The women didn't really

talk about feeling disconnected from white dads. More generally, however, some women did indicate that neither parent could understand their mixed race experiences. There were also stories of feeling included by family members, for example in the descriptions Susan and Tina gave of spending time with their Mexican grandmothers and in Ana's appreciation of the ways her white mom made explicit efforts to better get to know and support her. Extended family members, especially family members of color, who helped pass along culture often made a huge impact on these women's lives in helping to shape their racial identities.

The dynamics of school and friends were quite complicated. The usual theme in the majority of the stories is a sense of alienation. Within the institution of schools as they were structured, almost all these women experienced alienation, isolation, and rejection. Sometimes the discrimination was clearly linked to school procedures or teachers and counselors acting as power agents within the schools, as in the experiences of being placed in remedial reading, ESL classes, or being told not to go to college. Those direct challenges had to do with racism, most likely because the participants were identified as people of color. In terms of mixed race identity, one of the most dismissive structures within the school was the required forms for standardized testing in which they were forced to place themselves in boxes within which they did not entirely fit. However, many of the greatest pains in school came from rejection and harassment by peers. Participants in predominately white schools felt like they didn't fit. Many of them talked about how couldn't live up to the white standards of beauty and suffered from low self esteem as a result. This predicament brought up issues of internalized racism and for some, led to self-destructive behaviors. The one participant who was in a school with

mostly people of color (who attended school within this generation) also experienced alienation, this time for not being able to live up to black standards of beauty and acceptable ways of being. The participants who fared the best were in racially diverse schools. Even Joanna who told two stories of being confronted in a threatening way by black girls at her school, described school overall as a good experience because it was racially diverse and she found her niche among the “musical kids,” the “nerds,” and the “hippies.” She had a diverse group of friends who were black, white, Jewish, and multiracial. It is important to note that the two participants who did not discuss any identity challenges related to race at school, Ana and Mindy, not only attended diverse schools, but were also Asian. Ana, for example, mentioned that the students with her in the magnet school classes were less diverse, but there were Asians. Thus she was not isolated from other Asians. Elizabeth, who is Filipino but attended a less diverse mostly white school, also never discussed any particular identity challenges; however, when she was a teen she began to define herself racially in contrast to white people and “hardly had any white friends.” Asians are known as a distinct minority because many Asians have traditionally excelled in school at much higher rates than other students of color (Jo & Rong, 2003).

These women’s stories reveal some important information with implications for school policy. Although the majority of pressures these women felt as students came from their peers, it was the structure of segregated schools that created the atmosphere within which their peers acted to maintain segregation. Even participants who weren’t in segregated schools overall, were in segregated classes. This is a direct result of tracking policies and procedures. In the wake of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Brown v. Board, there has

been much debate about the effects of desegregation and the potential benefits of segregated schools (Ladson-Billings, 2004). It has been well documented that segregation has actually been increasing in recent years rather than decreasing (Kozol, 2005). Some scholars of color have demonstrated that many African-Americans received better schooling before desegregation (Siddle-Walker, 1996; hooks, 1994). In a recent speech given at the Southern Poverty Law Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina Gloria Ladson-Billings argued, “if we can’t have Brown, can we at least have Plessy?” stating that given the increasing segregation of schools what we need to do is strive for more equity of services between schools, paying particular attention to schools that serve predominately students of color.

This argument has merit; however, within the mixed race context, equal services in segregated schools still will not likely amount to quality schooling experiences, in terms of emotional health and development, for students who are mixed white and of color. Racial diversity, or lack thereof, was a key factor in the schooling experiences of these women. Although virtually all these women excelled academically, the majority of them in schools lacking diversity suffered emotionally; some of them even changed schools. Diversity was a key factor among these women of spaces they felt they could claim. The current racially segregated structures of most schools and schools systems alienate and marginalize biracial white/of color students.

Language school policies also impacted the Latina participants’ experiences of race and identity alienation, none of whom were taught Spanish in their homes. As Tina astutely pointed out, it was schooling policies that created the situation in which she did not have access to the Spanish language from her Mexican father. All of the Latinas –

Janet, Marta, Maria, Susan, and Tina – expressed a desire to learn Spanish and a lament that they were not taught Spanish. Each of them understood, however, that it was racialized political circumstances that led to their exclusion from learning Spanish at home. Although all of these women were successful academically, they suffered emotionally as a result of the alienation they felt from Spanish-speaking Latinos, including Spanish-speaking family members.

There weren't as many discussions of identity challenges in the workplace as there were among strangers, at home, or in school. However, three of the mixed black/white women – Diana, Ruth, and Brittney – experienced racism at work. Ana discussed the complexity of being counted as a person of color yet expected to act white (something Diana echoed), and Linda struggled with her positionality as a mixed race Japanese/white woman within a woman of color organization. One of the women, Linda, experienced professional development that aided her in her racial identity development. Perhaps part of the reason that there were not as many stories of identity challenges at work is because they had more opportunity to choose where they worked. However, as will be discussed further in the chapter on whiteness, it is important to note that these women, as a whole, possessed the white cultural capital they needed to succeed in the work world. Also, work in comparison to school, is not necessarily a place of primary identity formation.

These stories provide a broad overview of the multiple outsider positionalities these women experienced in a variety of institutions. The focus on institutions – of family, school, and work – allows us to better understand their actions, and the actions of others, as they are situated within particular settings. The women's narratives reveal pain



and trauma. They also provide glimpses into possible actions that others can take – whether family members, policy makers, school administrators and personnel, or employers – to support mixed race people. The next chapter shifts the focus away from the settings and their consequences to more carefully examine the agency these women claimed through particular actions and discourses.

## **Chameleons: Claiming Agency through Fluid Identities and Learning to Live with Ambiguity**

*I do think there's something about being mixed too, where you can get read, like people will just be like, "oh, you must be part whatever we are". You know what I mean? Like there is almost this thing. There is a story that I kept meaning to tell Silvia that I wanted to say so I'll just say it now. I was in New York a few years ago for a conference and we went dancing one night at this club. And, you know, in New York there are these huge clubs, like three floors and there's different music on the floors in the different areas. And I swear to God, it was crazy, even my friend was like this was crazy. Because at one part there were these like French people who were all like to speaking to me in French, and they were just like, "well you're French". They just assumed that I was French. Then I would walk 100 feet over and there was this group of Russians who were like convinced that I was Russian. And it went like that for the rest of the night. From like, you had your like Slavic country, you had your Latino countries, people just assume, like there was this whole thing of like trying to almost, like, claim me in some sort of way. I felt like it was this ultimate, like, ultra mixed race experience, you know? I mean, if you are going to market the mixed race experience, this would be it. -Maria*

*For me, I love being mixed. It's one of my favorite things in the whole wide world. There's definitely some baggage associated with it, but it also gives me a really, I think, unique perspective that monoracial people don't get. -Joanna*

*I feel like pretty much everywhere I go, I fit in. I feel like a chameleon. -Bobbi*

In the last chapter, I highlighted the stories that demonstrated the ways in which the women experienced *limits* to agentic action as defined through Giddens' (1979) model of structuration. However, even with the focus on structural limits, the narratives provided glimpses of agency because structure and agency are always operating in a dialectical relationship. In this chapter I shift the emphasis from structure to agency and highlight the strengths and possibilities for *agentic options* related to being mixed race. There was a constant tension in the narratives of the women between the challenges and the benefits of being mixed. Many described a consistent outsider status coupled with a

contrasting sense of belonging in a broad range of contexts. Despite the constant challenges and constraints to their mixed race identities, there was an overall sense that they found both joy and benefit to being mixed race women.

### **I Love Being Mixed**

Although all of the women at some point claimed agency through their mixed race identities and named positive benefits of being biracial, only 3 of the 16 women talked about being mixed as an overwhelmingly positive experience – Elizabeth, Joanna, and Brittney. Elizabeth emphasized throughout her interviews how much she enjoys being mixed race. She recognized her anomalous situation as she listened to others in the Boston group interview and said,

I guess I feel almost out of place little bit. You know in our individual interviews I just kept stressing how much I love being mixed race. It's been such a positive experience for me. I don't have a lot of issues, I guess, about being mixed race. I don't have a lot of angst about it. I feel really comfortable being mixed race... Because my mom was so positive about me being mixed race. Because I feel being half Asian and half white is not fraught like being half black and half white. It's like people are really willing to see you. If your part black then it's not okay. But if your part Asian, they're very willing to see you as white. For me it's not been a problem. I haven't had people say weird stuff to me because they assume I'm white. I haven't had people expose their inner racism to me.

There was some recognition by Elizabeth that her comfort with her identity probably had a lot to do with her ethnic identity as Asian and her ability to pass as white.

Joanna, who is mixed black and white and was also very positive about her identity, concurred with Elizabeth's analysis stating "I think that Asian is such a different type of minority." Mindy is also Filipino and White, like Elizabeth, but she has struggled tremendously with her identity. Still, she acknowledged Joanna's statement saying, "It's the whole model minority thing." Mindy added that "in the Philippines there's more of a history of mestizo" in which mestizos, people who are mixed part white, are looked upon

and treated very favorably. Yet, even with that recognition, Mindy had much angst about her mixed identity thus being mixed Filipino was not the determining factor in creating a positive experience. Plus, the two other participants who looked upon their experiences most favorably are not part Asian; they are mixed black and white.

Joanna, although she had experienced some discomfort with being “*the diversity*” in her cohort in college, said, “I love being mixed, it’s one of my favorite things in the whole world.” In her interviews she discussed being mixed as an overwhelmingly positive experience. For example, most of the time she welcomed the “what are you question?” because she likes to talk about her life, and she feels that her mixed race experiences give her a unique perspective on the world. Being mixed allows her to move within a variety of circles. She said that she likes the duality of her identity. She is a self-described “social butterfly” and likes the “fluidity of floating in and out of different groups.” Even still, Joanna had some discriminatory confrontations with others that prevented her from uncritically celebrating her identity. She had “a major culture shock” and a “racial coming of age” when she went to college and moved from a racially diverse neighborhood and high school to a place where “suddenly everyone was white and had never met people of color before.” Joanna explained,

I knew I was a person of color, I knew I was a minority but it didn’t mean anything because where I was from, it didn’t affect, as far as I could see, my life in school, or how my school treated me. And then all of a sudden I went to college and I was like, why do they have all these organizations for minority students, like do we still need this? And then after a month, I was like oh right, I get it.

After a month of being in this all white community she realized the difficulty of dealing with prejudiced white people. Thus she both celebrated her identity and acknowledged the struggles she faced.

Brittney, like Joanna, is also mixed black and white. She framed her experience as a mixed race woman as overwhelmingly positive as well. Brittney was the first person to speak in the group interview when I asked, “tell me what it’s like to be mixed?” responding, “I love it because I see the view of two different people and combining races is beautiful to me.” In her first individual interview she described her life experiences as overwhelmingly positive. Her narratives would fit well within the writings of the era that Ifekwunigwe (2004) would describe as the “age of celebration.” There was a way in which Brittney was very uncritical of her experiences stating that she “didn’t ever get treated any different” but then telling stories of being discriminated against, such as the one in the previous chapter of being called a nigger. By the end of the group interview, however, she was beginning to view her experiences in a new light. She shared,

It (participating in the project) has opened up my eyes a lot. It makes me look at people and notice things more whereas before I was just kind of like, I never noticed that. I never noticed any racism or anything. Maybe I just didn't want to notice, so I didn't see it. But now I think I'm going to notice it more, and be more aware of what's going on.

Her critical consciousness was changing as a result of participating in this project, and she was beginning to reflect on her experiences in new ways. Still, I do not want to imply that her previous view was incorrect. There was a definite sweetness about Brittney and a way in which she was able to not internalize the ignorant remarks made to her by others. Plus, overall, she did have positive experiences. As mentioned in the last chapter, Brittney was particularly attractive and had an amazingly beautiful group of friends; I wonder again, how much beauty played into her overwhelmingly positive experiences.

The stories the women in this project tell, with the exception of the three women above, are not overwhelmingly positive, yet all the women appreciated their mixed race identities and many did emphasize several benefits of being mixed. The most common thread in the benefits of being mixed was related to having fluid identities that allowed them access to acceptance among a wide range of people.

### **Fluidity: Moving In and Out of Various Worlds and Connecting to a Variety of People**

Ana, the participant who stood out as least challenged by structures in the last chapter, spoke of the values of being mixed race.

It's walking in two worlds, or three, or four, so therefore getting comfortable walking in lots of different worlds, crossing boundaries a lot. I think it's just being able to flow in and out of different kinds of groups, for me it would be flowing in and out of Asian groups and white groups. But also as part of me exploring my mixed-race identity and spending time with other groups of people of color, I feel like I have more comfort now with lots of different types of groups.

Brittney concurred with Ana's statement responding, "I feel that way too." Yet a few minutes later, Ana reminded us of the tensions between agency and structure as she added,

I feel like a strength is that I feel like I can go lots of places in the world, but the challenge is what if other people will try and keep us down? What do I do if I personally don't feel equipped to do the analysis? Because some days I feel sharp and some days it's like I'm British – I'm mad but I just stuff it. I don't have any words to say anything about it. It's hard if I'm the only person of color in the room, or if I'm the only Asian person in the room.

Although Ana appreciated the capacity to walk in different worlds and feel comfortable with a variety of people, doing so also made her vulnerable to attacks and other people's ignorance, and she didn't always feel prepared to deal with the discrimination she might face. Nonetheless, her identity and experiences as a mixed race woman have provided

her with the fluidity to “walk in different worlds” and feel comfortable with a variety of people. This acknowledgement of fluidity as part of the mixed race experience was prevalent in many of the women’s narratives.

Joanna, for example, said in the group interview,

Something that I kept saying in my individual interview, for me it always came back to fluidity and always being able to go wherever I want, and fit in any group. Part of it happens to be that I look racially ambiguous; I don't stick out in any group. But also that translated into my personality and my social interactions. And now it’s one of my favorite parts my personality, that I can get along with virtually anyone, you know? Even if they're not my favorite person and I'm not their favorite person. I can find some way to relate to them. Because ever since I've been growing up I've been having to move between worlds. And that has been extremely positive.

As Joanna spoke, there were several times that others in the group interview exclaimed, “exactly” or “yes” acknowledging that they could relate to what she was saying. The group conversation in Boston about fluidity continued as others responded to what Joanna said. Elizabeth responded first stating,

I think it's what she said, the flexibility of the ability to identify, to be almost chameleon-like I guess. And yet it depends on how, how people see you, definitely. Like whether or not you can slip in and out of different communities.

As the participants acknowledged their fluidity, many recognized that within US culture, their mobility is highly influenced by being specifically part white. Katherine named this explicitly in response to Elizabeth’s comment, stating:

We are all white too regardless of what we look like or how we believe we may or may not have white privilege. You're talking about fluidity and being mixed. I think it's probably a very different thing when you can move between different groups, but none of those groups are white.

As I will describe in more detail in an ensuing chapter, many of these women had a heightened awareness of the privilege associated with whiteness. Katherine is directly naming this privilege in the statement above. These collective stories reveal that their

cultural fluidity is based, they feel, in part on skin color and appearance but it is broader than that because it is also about the ability to get along with others and the important fact that they are all part white.

Alana, who could not pass as white in terms of skin color, nonetheless acknowledged her cultural whiteness as an asset to moving in white world. She said,

I'm never going to be white ... but it's the cultural whiteness that I really identify with..... I don't feel safe in white spaces anymore, but I know how to negotiate with them ... and I know how to like communicate with white folk and I know how to like go in and out of their spaces.

Ruth, who is mixed black and dark skinned said,

I don't feel like I have as much fluidity as maybe some other mixed-race people do, but I feel like I can get along with everybody pretty well. But I also feel like, I don't know, more so in Boston, that there are parts that I have to, that other people make me very aware of. I don't know if it's about slang, or just my neck definitely. I feel like Boston for some reason isn't the most welcoming for black people.

In this instance Ruth is acknowledging that there is a way in which she can get along with everyone, as Joanna stated at the beginning of this exchange. So there is a sense that having a mixed race experience makes it easier to get along with a wide range of people; there is fluidity present. However, that fluidity is limited by skin color as Ruth explained; she will always be recognized as (at least part) black and there are places, like Boston, that are not always accepting of black people and black ways of being. Earlier in the group interview, Joanna had talked about how for black women, “as soon as your neck starts moving, [white] people stop listening.” When she said this all the mixed black women in the room nodded their heads in agreement. Thus, it was clear that when they acted in ways culturally associated with blackness, their fluidity disappeared, and in



some instances, when they were identified as black based on skin color or appearance, the capacity for fluid mobility diminished.

Nonetheless, several of the women talked about experiencing that fluidity, especially in the way they were able to relate to a wide range of people. Bobbi, who is Somali and white, for example said, “I don't know if it's because I'm mixed. But I think it's just because there are so many different people in my family. If anybody comes at me from another culture I feel able to talk to them.” The women articulated personal fluidity in the sense of feeling comfortable interacting with people from a variety of backgrounds. Yet that fluidity was at times halted by racism. During the Boston group interview there was a discussion about how Boston has a long history of white racism against black people that is still palpable today in interracial interactions and visible in still segregated neighborhoods. Ruth experienced anger towards her from both white people who perceived her as black and black people who perceived her as mixed. She felt hostility in the air in Boston in ways she did not experience in Chicago. In addition, throughout her group interviews, she shared stories of being discriminated against based on race. These experiences occurred with strangers, with coworkers, and with college professors. She added, “It's interesting because my experience with racism as an adult, I really feel it's more because society perceives me as a black person. It's not mixed racism. It's racism as a black person.” Although she experienced a fair amount of racism, she also described an amazing ability to get along with a wide range of people. Ruth experienced racism as a black person and fluidity as a mixed person.

Some of the women experienced fluidity because they were often assumed to be the same background of the people with whom they had interactions, creating a sense of

connection, albeit at times ungrounded. Susan, for example, had a similar experience to that of Maria as described in the opening quote. Maria talked about her experience in the New York night club of being assumed to be the same ethnicity of whichever group she found herself in. Susan similarly shared that often, no matter where she was, people assumed that she shared their background. She said, “when I was in Turkey no one actually knew I wasn’t Turkish until I opened my mouth.” Marta similarly said,

I feel like I’m a chameleon in some ways, like if I’m in a Latin city I definitely get taken as Latin and I think Latin people look beyond skin color and I definitely have Latin features if you look, but a lot of people don’t look. Um, a lot of white people assume I’m white you know, and then tell me their really deepest racist thoughts, which is always a pleasure. And if I’m with a group of Jews, I actually get taken as Jewish.

Diana also talked about how black people identified her as black while white people often perceived her to be white. There were numerous stories by virtually all the women about fluid identities that allowed them access to acceptance in a variety of racial and ethnic communities. At times this fluidity was placed upon them when others made assumptions about their backgrounds, other times it was something they consciously strove for as they worked to gain acceptance in various communities.

### **Learning Fluidity**

In the Albuquerque group interview, I asked the question, “How do you navigate moving in and out of different cultures?” Ana responded first, stating,

I said in one of my individual interviews that because I often felt like I didn't quite know what was going on in the first place within my own cultures, I would observe a lot, just kind of get a sense of how things worked and what was cool and what wasn't. And I think that's something that I bring with me wherever I go now, just to listen a lot, get a feel for the place before I start interacting with folks. Because I don't want to do anything stupid, you know? I don't want to get kicked out of the space.

Maria added to what Ana said, stating,

Well yeah I think I told you like for me, doing stuff within my family is like where it is all learned. This is how this side of the family is and this is how *this* side of the family is, you know? I mean if you grow up with it, then you just kind of like know it. It's just like how you know language or not. It's like a language right? Like all communication. But then if it's groups I'm not a part of, yeah, I actually would say it's more like observing. I just think like traveling too, like when I went to Tunisia and then Caracas for delegation work, we had a lot of conversations around like, okay so we're a whole group of people color, and we're American, so like don't take up space, you know? We did a lot around like not being loud, not taking up space.

Both Ana and Maria emphasized the importance of observing others to learn their cultural norms.

In Ana's individual interviews, she talked about how she had to learn different ways of being as she moved from being with one side of her family to the other because the cultural norms were very different. She learned early to observe and pay attention to how others acted so that she would learn how to act in acceptable ways within each group. This observation skill is something she takes with her in all unfamiliar groups of people that she enters. Maria shared a very similar experience of learning young that different groups of people have distinct habits of being. She too emphasized the importance of observation and being cautious to not take up too much space.

At that point in the group discussion, there was a moment of silence. I waited a moment and then asked if there were other comments. Maria spoke up making an important point. "I guess it's just like being yourself still in those spaces," she said, "I mean I don't think it's, like, about taking on a different persona." Maria cautioned that sometimes people feel like they need to act a certain way or use a certain language, but they need to be respectful and learn cultural codes without co-opting them, maintaining genuineness. She said,

Certainly there might be pieces of that that might work but, you know, but I think there is a lot that goes on around this. I feel like people can co-opt culture in being with certain groups, you know, from like how people address each other.

She might have explained herself further but she was interrupted by Brittney who said,

For me it's not like a group of race, it's just like how different people get thrown together, not maybe by race but maybe by type of music they listen to, or what they like to do. It's not really like, with different groups I hang around with I act different with each one of them kind of because we do different things. There's different things that we, you know, we have different interests so, it's not really a race thing. It's just we have different things in common.

Thus, Brittney changed the direction of Maria's point arguing that she would act differently in different groups by virtue of being connected around different activities not necessarily because of race. Maria again emphasized her original point saying to Brittney, "But you're still yourself. You're not like all of a sudden some other person."

Then, however, Maria recalled what it was like for her to navigate academia and how she had to learn "what people wear and how people talked." She acknowledged that she had to alter her ways of being to fit in and be successful. This occurred when she switched from public school to private school as well. She explained,

I know especially for me at that age, it was very much about not standing out too much because I already had shit going on, so I didn't need anything else. But, I don't know, I think that navigating academia is like a whole other culture too.

Maria recognized that there are situations in which she takes on different ways of being in different spaces, but she had to in order to be successful, as she did in school culture, for example. In an effort to validate her experience as someone who has also had to learn how to navigate academia, I shared some of my thoughts on this topic, stating,

But I think it gets complicated, that you might act in different ways in different spaces. I mean it's all me, it's just that different parts of myself get accentuated. I think that I have really different ways of being, and part of that comes from having two different cultures. They're both me, but different things get accentuated. Like even my language, my language changes from one space to

another and how my name is pronounced. Or physical space, like how much physical space I have with other people, that changes from one space to another. The humor I use changes from one space to another. There are some things that some people can accept that others can't. So I think that if somebody watched me they might say that I act different. And if they didn't know me they would think that I'm not being myself. But I feel like different parts of myself get accentuated in different places, and they're all parts of me.

Brittney said, "I agree," and stated that there are different things she can say and do with different groups of friends but then added, "I don't know if that has to do with race, but it's like who you're with."

Ana continued the conversation; she removed the focus from a personal desire to fit in and emphasized a desire to gain understanding of and respect for difference. She said,

The thing about kind of scoping out the new culture and trying to figure out about fitting in is that I don't know if I'm actually fitting in or not fitting in. But I think for me in these spaces, a lot of the observing comes from trying to understand and respect where this culture is coming from. Because sometimes it can be really different from where I'm coming from, so maybe I'm partly looking for common ground, partly just if something happens, just trying to find a way to explain it, just trying to make sense of this in the culture that I'm within.

Brittney then added that she too watches people to understand different races. At that point we ran out of time so the conversation ended.

This exchange, however, provides some valuable insights into how fluidity is learned. The fluidity of navigating diverse cultures that we learned comes from a combination of three main factors. The first is learning from a young age that different people have different ways of being and to be accepted in a group, you must learn the customary ways of being and not do anything disrespectful. The second is the importance of observation. We know that we must pay attention to the distinct cultural codes present in each group. The third is genuineness. This means that even as we learn

new ways of being, we must still find ways to be ourselves. Like Brittney, Ana, and Maria, Alana also talked about the importance of listening more than talking and trying to not take up too much space. She said,

And really what I'm learning too is just to be more silent and not talk so much and to really listen to folks. Because I feel like we learn from listening. And I think I've learned a lot from really just like trying to be more, like I said, just more aware about not taking up so much space (p. 16)

Susan also discussed how she learned fluidity by virtue of being mixed. Susan had traveled to a variety of countries and often found that she could easily adapt to the cultures. She explained,

I think you're just able to read cues over a lifetime of developing of mainstream of cues of going back and forth where you have different rules. You never have an idea that there's one way the world works, so you don't go into some place just flabbergasted that people aren't doing things the way you do them. Or resistant to them because you're used to switching between you know ways of doing things, or ways of speaking even or ways of body language. I found in Turkey that I was able to really get the Turkish body language down and that was another reason why I could really fit in in a crowd.

Mindy discussed how she learned about middle class white culture from her white grandmother. Although at first she had little contact with her white grandmother because she disapproved of her parents' interracial marriage, eventually her grandmother spent time with Mindy and her sister. Mindy stated,

Despite the difficulty, my grandmother gave me some really positive things. When we were kids she would take us up to Boston and bring us to museums and the symphony and just all these cultural things that I don't think- if it weren't for her we would never have gotten that, which is important. It's funny, I think now where we grew up and who we were maybe she was afraid we were, I don't know, just so not cultural. I don't know.

Mindy was raised working class, her parents ran a souvenir shop and Mindy worked much of her childhood. Her grandmother literally taught her about aspects of middle class, white culture.

Although for some of the women, fluidity was accessed at least in part to due to ambiguous physical appearances, there were also distinct ways that we learned how to move between various cultural and ethnic groups by being exposed to cultural differences through our family members.

### **Claiming Spaces in Monoracial Groups**

There were a variety of ways that the participants took risks throughout their lives to claim space in communities, cultures, and situations in which they were originally either cast out or to afraid to approach. Many of these women had to learn to claim space, for example, within their respective ethnic and racial communities.

Alana, for instance, talked about how she “did not grow up with black women at all” and as a result she “did not feel comfortable in black spaces at all.” However, as an adult, she has been consciously claiming black spaces. She says, as a result,

Now it’s like I actually really appreciate being in black spaces, like I definitely feel a camaraderie and a community. I don’t feel weird about speaking, and I don’t feel like people judge me in the way that I always thought that they did.

In fact, Alana’s community is now composed primarily of people of color. She has chosen to live with people of color and currently is only interested in dating people of color. She finds that being around people of color provides a place of refuge from the discrimination she encounters from her predominately white graduate school classmates who perceive her as “the angry black woman.” “I know that people hate me in my classes,” she said. “I’m okay with that; I don’t care. That doesn’t really bother me so much. I mean it bothers me that there is a stereotype.” The reason why she doesn’t let her classmates’ racism bother her greatly is because she recognizes that at the same time she is oppressed in that space, she simultaneously earns privilege in other spaces as a

*light-skinned* black woman with access to white cultural ways of being. She and her darker skinned friends notice that she gets “more attention in queer spaces” from both white women and women of color because, “even though there may be mixed race, black dynamics, even with other people of color they’re still there because we live in a white supremacist culture and everyone is indoctrinated within that, you know?” So, for Alana, “It’s always like well you’re thin, and you’re light-skinned, shit is really different for you.” In other words, she is accepted to a greater extent by white people and because of internalized racism at times she is favored by black people as well.

As Alana claims her space within black communities, she strives to learn from the challenges black women pose to her about the privileges she holds. She is learning to listen yet remain in black spaces instead of automatically assuming that others don’t want her there. In fact, she welcomes the challenges and simultaneously finds strength in the comfort of shared ways of being. She said,

That’s really why I choose to live with people of color too, because I feel like I’m going to be challenged, and I’m going to be checked in a lot of ways, and it will force me to deal with a lot of things that with white people I know I won’t have to deal with. But mainly it’s around the safety issue because they [white people] get so angry sometimes and I feel I need the space to cry and vent and feel very vulnerable.

Thus Alana is claiming space simultaneously in black spaces and white [academic] spaces, places where she often is not immediately accepted.

Katherine, who is also mixed black and white, did grow up with black friends yet she often felt out of place in spaces exclusively for black people. She said she thought about joining a group for black students in high school but she didn’t try to join because she knew she’d be uncomfortable. In college she gravitated towards groups for mixed people, but after college she consciously participated in a focus group for black women.



She said, “I knew I was going to be uncomfortable” but “nobody there made me feel uncomfortable.” At the time of the interview, Katherine was preparing to begin graduate school she said that she wanted to get involved in the multicultural group, but added,

I am also thinking about the black organizations and I want to be involved in that. But I think my main motivation for being involved is so that I get over my discomfort with it. You know, we’re talking about graduate students, nobody is going to make me feel uncomfortable there. If I feel uncomfortable, then it’s me.

Katherine is slowly moving towards taking the risk to insert herself in spaces for black people.

Janet and Tina, who like Alana grew up in predominately white circles, also talked about claiming space within people of color circles. Although Janet viewed herself as more white than Latina as a youth, after being exposed to more brown people through her high school switch and her later geographical move to Albuquerque, Janet began to insert herself more into spaces for women of color. She got involved in a local group for young women of color and said,

I definitely feel that the couple times I’ve been with the group and that I’ve kind of hung out with them, I felt very comfortable. They’re very inviting and warm, and very easy to get along with, and the women are going through all sorts of things, you know? Body image issues, dealing with things in their past, and I feel like it’s a very comfortable space for me. But it’s hard too, because I feel that then it comes back to my background, and the fact that I don’t know enough about my family history, and just about history in general, and then also being mixed race, too. I’m always constantly questioning how people are perceiving me.

Janet is still in the process of learning to feel comfortable in women of color spaces. It has sparked in her a desire to learn more about her culture and history.

Like Janet, Tina has also recently begun to insert herself in women of color spaces. She too subsequently found a new interest in her Mexican family history when she began college and started consciously exploring her mixed race identity. She first

began asking her Portuguese co-worker questions about his cultural background. Then, she said, “I started asking my grandma these same questions and I would spend a lot of time at my grandma’s when I was in community college and really just trying to just like probe her about family history.” Tina, who naturally has light brown hair, dyed her hair black. She said, “I really like black. That’s like one of the only physical traits I can actually change to like help myself put a point to that biraciality. I like having that little marker.” She had been dyeing her hair for about four and half years. I asked her if there was anything going on at that time that prompted her to dye it black. She said, “I was applying for the [Latino] scholarship, it was a very hard thing for me to sort of be validating my cultural back ground. Maybe it was around the same time, I don’t really remember.” At age 19, while at San Francisco State, a mixed race friend gave her a flier about a scholarship for people of color interested in doing research on mental health. The scholarship was for people of color. Tina applied and was awarded a three year scholarship. She utilized that time to study about race and as a result, she said,

I really started to transition myself from calling myself Mexican to someone of biracial heritage. And then you know, I started reading about those mestizas. I started, you know, from there, I’m multiracial! So I just started a process of trying to shape my identity.

The scholarship gave her the opportunity to claim her biracial identity, but it also challenged her because up until that point she considered herself Mexican. However, she found it difficult to solely claim her Mexican identity in the face of other scholarship recipients who challenged her authenticity. She commented,

Those next couple of years in the scholarship I really started to realize that I was mixed race because it was a national well-known scholarship that was given to students of color. We would go to this conference once a year, and I would get these looks like, what the heck are you doing here? It would drive me crazy.

Tina, who to most people “looks white” and doesn’t speak Spanish, said she had to constantly “out” herself as Mexican year after year. During that time she began to embrace her mixed race identity, but she still questioned whether or not she should be in that people of color space. At age 24, Tina continues to insert herself in Latina/Chicana spaces and continues to question her legitimacy.

I joined the Chicana club at Santa Cruz, where I go now [as a master’s student]. And I get these emails and I’m like, this is not me. I would feel like I would take up resources if I applied to scholarships. I don’t know. And I get really nervous when I think about, you know, thinking about my last name. My name is so, you know, Mexican, it’s Tina Torres. And you know I worry, does my name privilege me in applications? Is there a racial quota? I get really nervous about stuff like that. And then I’ve had times when I’ve gone to caucuses, and I’ve emailed people that are setting them up, and I’m like I’d like to contribute and whatever. They’ll meet me and they’re like, oh wow you’re Tina Torres. Oh, ok.

Another time she went to a Chicana caucus and when she arrived they said, “oh your Tina Torres, that’s weird.” Tina has thus had instances of being included and excluded as a Latina. Although it still causes her to question her identity and legitimacy, she feels more comfortable claiming her biracial identity and argued, “Biraciality seems to be a new emerging identity. It takes people time to learn. It’s a new form of unlearning racism we need to do, stop questioning people’s physical attributes to of color. That’s how I feel about it.”

Susan attended her college campus group for Latinas a few times. Like Tina, she also had the experience of being, “looked at very suspiciously” in the Latina group meetings. However, at the time of the interviews, at age 36, Susan said she had come to a place where she no longer worried about how others identified her and what they thought.

The women told many stories of claiming space within communities of their ethnic groups and within communities of color. In addition, as evidenced in the last

chapter, there were many ways in which the participants claimed space in work and school institutions that were predominately white. Rejection, and sometimes merely fears of rejection, at times prevented these women from continuing to claim space. However, there were many conscious attempts by the women to insert themselves in non-white monoracial spaces. As they did so their comfort level with their identities shifted.

### **Learning to Live with Ambiguity**

For a number of these women, a large part of the mixed race experience was learning to live with ambiguity. The topic of “ambiguity” was raised in all three group interviews. Although only four women used the actual word “ambiguity,” they all described experiences of dealing with the ambiguity of their mixed race identities. Ana, for example, talked in her individual interviews about ambiguity in her life and then raised the topic again during an Albuquerque group discussion of having children. She said,

I think I spoke at my earlier interview about being comfortable with ambiguity and how with no clear answers it gets complicated sometimes. And sometimes it just is what it is. So I think there's some sadness about what shade of brown my son is and there some incredible joy about how incredibly beautiful he is; it's all simultaneously true.

Ana has a son who she describes as “ambiguously beige.” Although she too has self-described “ambiguously beige” skin, she worries about how her son might choose to racially/ethnically identify himself in the future because, based on skin color, he could pass for white.

Mindy, in an entirely separate group interview, in Boston, also invoked ambiguity. She said,

I think being mixed is also about ambiguity, you know, learning to live with that. Learning to live with your own questions about who you are and how your

identity changes in each setting. You know, like dealing with how people see you in trying to shift.

Susan spoke next saying,

I think that dealing with ambiguity is a personal process as you grow up, as you age; I think it's interesting how that's a very personal individual process. It seems that no matter what you're doing internally about ambiguity you always come right up against the same thing externally. So it seems like you struggle internally to get a comfort level with ambiguity and then find that you're constantly being called on your ambiguity externally so you go through this double process of finding a comfort with yourself but having to be constantly challenged at the same time in trying to develop a comfort. You know? You have to be comfortable with yourself but also comfortable with portraying yourself, you know there's a strange internal and external portion of it.

Mindy interrupted Susan to clarify that ambiguity is about “constantly dealing with people’s expectations” that are “especially based on how you look, not necessarily what you also know culturally.” Throughout her interviews, Mindy described never ending struggles with being identified by others as white yet not feeling white culturally. Mindy explained that, whereas mixed race people have an ambiguous identity based on “two sets of knowledge,” monoracial people “have a more holistic path that they can access because their family histories are more, more one.” However, later in the interview Ruth, who cannot pass for white, added her thoughts arguing that not being able to pass as white makes a significant difference in experience. She said,

I feel like don’t I fit in the so ambiguous category, but I felt like I can relate to some of the things. And during this conversation I’ve realized that my experience as a mixed-race person has been good, but my experience as a black person has not been good.

The accounts by Mindy, Susan, and Ruth exemplify the constant interplay between agency and structure. Racial politics play into their abilities to claim agency. For each of them it caused conflict although those conflicts played out in entirely different ways.

Halfway through the Oakland group interview, upon listening to others in the group, Alana said, “We talked about the tolerance for cultural ambiguity in the borderlands. I could go read us a quote.” In reality, no one in that group interview had previously used the phrase “tolerance for cultural ambiguity” but many of the stories shared by the participants exemplified a tolerance or a need for tolerance for ambiguity. The Oakland group interview was held at Alana’s house so she had access to her books and left the room to retrieve the reading. It wasn’t until almost the end of the interview that Alana found her opportunity to reintroduce the quote. The conversation had been intense and at times emotionally charged as people talked about dealing with whiteness, racism, and the need to educate ignorant people. Wondering how to wrap up, I said, “It’s heavy in here. I can feel the weight, and it’s also been two hours and one minute.” It was at that moment that Alana asked the group if she could read her quote. She pulled out the book *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa and read:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly; nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 101)

Immediately Linda said, “I love that book.” I shared that I did as well and that for me it had been a turning point book because up until the time I read it, the concept of claiming a mixed identity hadn’t even occurred to me.

Although the group interview could have ended at that moment on that positive note, it would not have been true to the overwhelmingly heavy sentiment and critical

thought present throughout most of the interviews. Linda spoke up about her inability to live up to Anzaldúa's description of the powers of "the new mestiza" and confessed,

I'm really struggling with this. I just feel really negative. It's just the downward spiral of feeling bad about stuff. I don't feel like I can sustain contradictions or turn inner hurts into something else. I can't even hold those. I don't. And I am always choosing one. I'm always going to be identifying as a person of color. I'm never like, "I'm white." That's what I'm struggling with right now, is learning to acknowledge, to be in the contradiction and embrace it, and all that. Sustaining the contradictions. To turn the ambivalence into something else. I don't feel like that's even a comfortable place for me to be, to be in both. I love thinking that, yes it makes me pluralistic, it makes me, you know think differently, and it does. But, every day I'm making choices about how I'm presenting my gender, how I'm presenting my sexuality, and how I'm being white or not, and I'm never being white. I'm never choosing white. I don't think that I've ever chosen white in my life because, because that's how the world views me in a lot of ways. I'm sure it's different a lot of times, but a lot of times I pass too. And I'm in the space of then of not even choosing it. I'm not saying I'm going to pass as white, and this is what feels good for me, you know? I don't know if I'm holding the contradictions.

When Linda finished talking, Tina asked her, "what do you think it would take for you to hold those contradictions?" Linda responded, "being more comfortable with being white." This topic of dealing with whiteness was ever present and clouded a tolerance for ambiguity. As evident in the descriptions of racial identity formation discussed in chapter one, none of these women wanted to claim their whiteness, there was not much tolerance for the ambiguity of being part *white*.

This is not to say that the women did not hold a tolerance for ambiguity, but the juggling of cultures was not as easily navigated as Anzaldúa might make it seem. Nonetheless, the women did feel that their ambiguous, fluid, mixed race identities provided them with some assets. As described above, one of those assets was the ability to make connections with a wide variety of people. Another benefit that several of the women described was that their experiences helped them to have a more open-minded and consciously critical perspective on things.

## Open-minded, Critical Thinking

As the participants strove to claim agency they continually faced structural, institutional, and political barriers. However, the women also acknowledged benefits to being mixed. Several of the women talked about how being biracial positively impacted their thinking. Tina, for example said,

I guess for me it's about helping me to be more critical about very important issues about identity not just only the political, societal level, but being critical about race, class, and heteronormative behaviors. And the way that people stereotype each other; it's helped me realize what those boundaries are and how we learn, how my response is to that. And it's also helped me think really critically about who I am and what my role is, and how to, I guess, how to identify. Because I don't think I would ever really be thinking this critically about race and things like that if I weren't mixed.

Since Tina is able to pass as white and grew up with a white mom with primarily white friends, she understood that many white people had the capacity to be raised in homogeneous communities and never have to think critically about race. She too could have had that experience had she not been Mexican and not been close to her extended Mexican family.

Even Linda, who spoke above about her struggle to hold contradictions and spoke often of her positionality as an outsider conceded that her outsider perspective was “a position of power” that allowed her insights into distinct cultures. Marta concurred, admitting that no matter what group she is in, she often feels “different, for whatever reason.” But, she added,

The good part is that I do feel like there's some strength or power in this fusion. I feel like it's expanding my way of thinking. That I just don't think of things in boxes, or like what you are saying, so I'm always looking for new ways to do things. And I feel like there's a way it has enhanced my creativity. Because I feel like I'm always trying to look at things from different points of view. And in some of my art I'll bring in both sides.



Marta is an artist. She shared with me pictures of her amazing art and there was often a fusion of Latin and Jewish influence. Thus her creative thinking translated into the creativity of her art. Alana also shared that she too felt her experiences as a mixed race woman helped her to think outside of the box. She said,

I think that definitely in terms of what you are saying in terms of not thinking in boxes, I really relate to that. I'm able to think more fluidly about a lot of things, for me, because I'm black and white, and because in this country we tend to only talk about race within a black/white binary, it's really enabled me to connect. I feel like I connect more to the collective as people of color from like multiple different national and racial identities. There's a link of solidarity in being colonized subjects. And so I feel like being mixed has enabled me to break outside of that binary and really connect with a lot of different types of people of color. So I really do appreciate that.

Alana felt that her open minded thinking helped her to connect with a wide range of people. She also felt that her mixed race identity helped her to better come to terms with both her queer identity and her gender identity as a femme.

And also coming into my queer identity as a mixed person sort of really enabled me to think about my own gender identity and my own identity as a femme person. Which is something that like, because when I was growing up I only thought about my identity or my femme identity as something that was connected to a white femme identity very specifically. And I never really felt feminine because of that. And I always was a tomboy and always kicked it with a lot of guys, and had a couple girlfriends that I had crushes on. But more recently now that I'm mostly in queer spaces of color, my femme identity is something very different for me. It's not just about assimilating or trying to be, or aspiring to this white femme identity. I think that also has enabled me to think about gender variance in different ways because of the fluidity of my racial identity.

Although it is Alana's mixed race identity – being a mixed brown person in a predominately white world – that made her understanding of her femme identity problematic, it is also her mixed race identity that has enabled her to embrace her “gender variance.” She implies that her tolerance for racial ambiguity has translated into a tolerance for gender-presentation ambiguity.

Bobbi also felt that being the product of an interracial couple helped her to be more open-minded. Linda added to her statement:

Bobbi: Like me and my sister always say that we know what our parents are going to say, and it's because our parents are different people. I think there's a very Somali attitude toward something and there's also a very white people attitude, you know? And we can think like both those people, so there's something about that. Maybe we're more open-minded.

Linda: We're able to negotiate (Lots of mm-mms from the rest of the group)

Bobbi: I think it's good for us.

Thus there was an overall sentiment within the Oakland group that being mixed helped create a more open-minded, thoughtfully critical perspective on issues even though it can also create a sense of isolation. Yet, there were also critical perspectives expressed among the participants about this idea of mixed race people automatically having critical, open-minded perspectives as a result of being multiracial. Maria, for example, when I mentioned this idea of being mixed aiding us in communicating with diverse people, argued,

Do you think there is even a whole myth even around that though? Around like, somehow if there is an all-Latino group that somehow we're all, they are all the same. I mean maybe because we're all mixed and that kind of breaks things up to begin with, but even in all-black spaces it's not that people are all the same, you know? I think that we have to be really careful around that because again, are we perpetuating stereotypes too around ideas of sameness? I mean I think that something that I'm realizing that, like, you know like, there's all kinds of people and so, even if that's how I'm identifying, and I'm not identifying as mixed in a certain space, I don't necessarily feel like that necessarily means like I'm not Latina either. Because like they're all kinds of ways that people identify, and have like some sort of experience around that. You know being like 10th generation black versus being an immigrant and versus Jamaican descent, and all that, and the U.S. is like, "oh that's black," versus someone that is like of Ethiopian descent, you know what I mean? I just feel like when you start looking at blackness, or any sort of group, there is no sameness.

Maria's perspective provided a critical reminder that if we hold ourselves as the models of understanding of difference then we can inadvertently dismiss the diversity that exists within other groups of people.

Linda also had a critical perspective on this idea that she shared later in the Oakland group interview. She said,

I wish. I wish that were true. There was something that somebody said, I forgot already, but it was something about how we are more tolerant, that yes we have this ability to see outside of the box. But just like any other group of any category, or people who are really narrow minded, there are people who are really fucked up and racist or whatever. I wish it would be true that yes we are going to be clear because we have fluidity in our face, so we're going to have fluid gender, and yes we're going to be open to non-gender conformity, but I don't think it's true. I think it's about who we're around. I think it's about how we're raised. But it's also about what we choose to expose ourselves to.

Bobbi disagreed, countering, "But I think that if you have one parent from one culture and another parent that's from another culture, even if you were raised with one culture, you have to think like them." Linda argued back stating that especially if you were raised with only one culture, you won't necessarily have an understanding of two cultures. An important part of the context necessary to understand this exchange is that Bobbi was raised primarily with her white mom, thus in a way she was speaking about herself. Bobbi felt she had two perspectives. But Bobbi did not have a strictly monocultural experience because she didn't grow up completely in America. She was raised part of her life in Somalia, thus she had an experience of living in two different countries and cultures. Alana, acknowledging Linda's point about the importance of who you hang out with said,

I'm kind of curious because I feel like the way, the reason that I think critically and the reason that I have this consciousness around mixed-race identity is because I'm around radical folk. I think it's because I'm around queer spaces. I really don't want to romanticize it.

Alana said that it was being around politicized people that contributed most to her consciousness. She feels that under different circumstances she would have identified as mixed race but “wouldn’t have cared at all.” Alana then said that she had always thought part of the consciousness came from not passing as white but she has met several mixed people who pass who have a critical consciousness and she wondered why. That led, once again into another conversation on the politics of whiteness.

Thus in the end, several of the women wanted to claim that they were critical, open-minded thinkers because of their bicultural, mixed race experiences. However, at the same time there was a growing critique of that perspective and a caution about romanticizing the mixed race experience. Although there was some dissention at times in the group interviews, for the most part there were many points of connection. In addition, the individual interviews revealed many overlapping experiences. For many of these women, claiming agency included finding solidarity with other mixed race women.

### **Creating Mixed Race Community**

The stories of agency also included stories of isolation. As told in the last chapter, there were countless stories of feeling like outsiders and being excluded by others. However, virtually all of the women stated that they felt a sense of community and connection with other mixed race people. Some women stated that they felt most solidarity with other mixed people of the same racial/ethnic backgrounds, but one determining factor of solidarity appeared to be embodying a mixture that is both white and of color. Alana discussed this, stating,

And I think it's important to have these categories because they create these links of solidarity, these links where we can create communities and sort of re-imagine what it means to be mixed. And it doesn't mean that we're all going to have the

same experience identically. I mean just look at this group, we're all coming from totally different places, but I think there is definitely something to having one parent of color and having a white parent. I mean I can't speak from outside this country but just even within the history of our culture there are so many different ways you can talk about it. Whether it be blood quantum, whether it be among indigenous folks, or the one drop rule, or within the way the racial hierarchies were established within the US through slavery which has impacted all people of color. And then all these anti-miscegenation laws, eugenics, I mean there are so many different ways to talk about the idea of white cultural purity trying to be, like, created within this country to create a supreme Master race, right? All of us are really challenging and being able to like have some sort of analysis of whiteness but also to be people of color, and I think that because of that history there's definitely, there is definitely a commonality in common experience that I think that we all probably share on multiple levels. So yeah, definitely. But then also there is definitely room for differences in that.

Thus, Alana was arguing that mixed people who have one parent of color and one white parent have a connection by virtue of being caught in the middle of a history of both racism and white supremacy. Creating solidarity with other mixed people could allow us, she said, to “re-imagine what it means to be mixed.”

Two of the participants had started groups for mixed race women. In 1981, Marta founded a group for mixed race people called “Mongrels” that she participated in for several years. Linda had helped start get-togethers a couple years back she called “mixed race mixers” for (primarily queer) mixed race folks. She said that there had only been two or three gatherings but, she said,

It's funny whenever I ran into people that I don't see very frequently who are also mixed, it's like “oh when you going to have another mixed mixer?” But it's kind of amazing, once we started doing it we realized how many mixed people we knew.

There are two important points that can be gleaned from that statement. The first is that mixed race people are expressing a desire to congregate with other multiracial people, the second is that often when we are in the presence of other mixed race folks we are unaware of it consciously thus we don't always connect as mixed race people.

Most of the women talked about either a strong connection to other mixed race people or a desire to connect with other mixed race people at some point. Clearly from the stories above Marta, Alana, and Linda desired connection with other mixed race people. Joanna stated

Generally I feel more comfortable around a mixed group of people. Because I feel inherently we have something in common. ... I feel mixed people have an understanding to not fit neatly in the box and move in two different worlds.

Katherine said she feels most comfortable “with other mixed black and white women” but also feels “very comfortable around mixed people in general.” Mindy and Elizabeth both said that they feel most comfortable around bicultural people.

Many of the women had a core group of mixed race friends. Brittney, for example said,

I have a lot of friends that are half black and half white and it's weird that we all come together and there is like maybe eight or nine of us that hang out and were half black and half white and it's like, we are all different, but somehow it's just because of us being of two different races, we come together because we're not really accepted in the black, just all black groups.

Susan said, “All my friends are mixed race.” Maria’s closest friends are mixed race some Latina and white, but not all. Ana too has mixed race friends and a light-skinned black partner who can relate to many mixed race issues and experiences. Her best friend growing up was mixed race and they are still close. Thus, for most of these women a large part of claiming agency and creating community involved developing friendships with other mixed race people, especially people who are mixed white and of color.

However, trying to create that community has been scary for some. Linda admitted,

There was this hapa conference and I couldn't go. I was terrified to be in a community where, I don't know, where I would see people who look like me and I

wouldn't be able to position myself as an outsider. It was too much to actually find somewhere that might actually belong.

Marta understood that fear and said,

I had a similar issue. And my lover was like, "are you afraid it could be good?" And I was like I'm afraid it could be good and I'm afraid it could be bad. Sometimes they're just things, you expect them to be really good and then they just suck. But then if I didn't go I could hold out the hope that there's something out there, that there is community that I could find some day. But if I went and it was bad then there is no hope. And I think that's just hard for me.

Nonetheless, both Linda and Marta, at different points in their lives initiated groups for mixed race people, thus the desire to connect with other multiracial folks was greater than the fear of not finding community.

Throughout all the women's stories there was an expressed desire to connect with other mixed race people in order to find validation and a sense of belonging. Most of the women had significant friendships with other mixed race women and those who did not appeared to be longing to find communion with other mixed race women.

## **Conclusion**

The interplay between insider and outsider status for these mixed race women is complex. Although it is important to acknowledge structural constraints to gaining insider status and internal trepidations about belonging, it is equally important to acknowledge the benefits these women found in being mixed race. Mixed race experience is set in a sordid history of white supremacy and racism that has included widespread degradation of miscegenation and a simultaneous exotifying of mixed race bodies and lives.

Anti-miscegenation laws were not repealed in several states until 1967, either shortly before or shortly after these women were born. A long history of colonization in

the United States has created a general mistrust of white people by people of color that continues today (Willinsky, 1988). One of the ways that people of color have been able to sustain themselves and achieve success in a white dominated society is to unite and demand equity through programs such as affirmative action (Williams, 2006). Often people of color have created safe spaces with other people of color. Most people with a critical analysis of race relations understand the need and benefit for spaces exclusively for people of color.

However, this division between white people and people of color places mixed race people who have one white parent and one parent who is a person of color in precarious positions among many groups of people as they can be perceived as a threat in many circles. As discussed in the literature review, the history of racism includes a vilification of mixed race people (Knox, 1850). Although rarely discussed openly, one need only do a search of white supremacist groups to realize that there continue to be active hate groups that name multiracial people as the demise of society and the ultimate sin. Without much effort one can find a plethora of racist propaganda that maligns mixed race people who are mixed white and of color. There is also some distrust of mixed people who claim mixed identities among some people of color who are civil rights advocates; they fear that multiracial people will deny their heritage of color and argue that affirmative action is no longer necessary (Williams, 2006).

To counteract this hatred and distrust of multiracial people, in the past 20 years there has been a growing body of writings that celebrate the mixed race experience. Mixed race people are speaking, and being spoken for, in many positive ways (Anzaldúa, 1999; Camper, 1994; O'Hearn, 1998; Root, 1992 & 1996). Within these writings there



have been some authors (Trueba, 2004; Root, 1992) who have exalted mixed race people as the answer to great racial divides romanticizing the mixed race experience and dismissing the power in the politics of racism. Mixed race people are often caught in a trap of being either pathologized or romanticized, neither of which allow us to be understood as complex, multifaceted human beings. The participants' stories in these chapters on structure and agency break down the binaries of pathology and celebration.

In order to understand the participants' stories, they must be understood in the context of these ongoing race wars. Many of the women in the study are highly educated, politicized and racialized. They are thus cautious about adding to the romanticization of mixed race people and considerate of why some people of color may not accept them. This context helps explain why so few of the women would say unconditionally, "I love being mixed race!" It also explains why some of them centered themselves in communities of color while others struggled to claim space within their own communities of color and simultaneously dealt with barriers in white dominated institutions. Nonetheless, these women did and are claiming space for themselves and learning to live with the ambiguity of their multiracial existence.

Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) is a powerful reference for understanding these women's experiences of living in the borderlands. Alana invoked a quotation from that book about the mestiza's ability to have a tolerance for ambiguity and contradictions. Linda admitted that this tolerance was something with which she still struggled. However, the struggle does not negate her personal power. Like the stories these women tell, Anzaldua's writing is also about both the power of the mestiza consciousness and the struggle inherent in being mestiza. She writes:

Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patios, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?...Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. (p. 100)

Linda's concern about not having a tolerance for ambiguity is a part of the mestiza experience as Anzaldúa defines it. Linda, as the daughter of a darkskinned mother, faced the dilemma of determining which collectivity to listen to. Anzaldúa is arguing that mestizas will better be able to cope when they develop a tolerance for contradictions; Linda knows this and she is actively working to increase her tolerance for that which she rejects – her whiteness. It takes work. Anzaldúa argues,

The work of the mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. (p. 102)

In the heart of these stories of exclusion, there were also multiple stories of transcending racial divides as these women experienced the ability to move fluidly between people of various races and ethnicities. These forays created links between cultural divides. We cannot be sure of exactly what created their abilities to effectively communicate and integrate across lines of difference, but we can learn from what their stories tell us. As an educator, I have found that one of the most difficult tasks in helping people to understand the politics of power, privilege, and difference is helping them to see that their current worldview may not be the only or the best worldview. These women's stories remind us that there are multiple worldviews that can coexist and that one worldview is not necessarily better than another.

Perhaps one of the most important messages throughout all the stories is the power to learn through active listening. Although several of the women gained access to

fluidity by virtue of having ambiguous physical features, adapting to distinct cultural groups was not innate for these women. They learned it through powers of observation. Through their stories, the participants tell us that they were able to move between various cultural groups, in part, because they would take the time to respectfully observe others, actively listen to what others had to say, and then take care not to act in ways that would not offend people's cultural ways of being and not impose their own cultural habits. At the same time, some of the women cautioned that this observation and adaptation must not be used to co-opt culture and that the key to successful mobility between cultures is to remain genuine.

Another self-described attribute that many of these women possessed was open-minded, critical thinking. Some of the women felt that their bicultural experiences led them to think outside of boxes, understand various perspectives, and be open to differences. They felt their biracial experiences helped them to be more accepting of other ambiguities around race, gender and sexuality. However, in group discussions some participants felt cautious about naming a cause and effect relationship between the mixed race experience and open-mindedness or increased critical thinking skills. Some argued that their critical perspectives were a result of the people they chose to have in their lives, "radical folk" for example. Perhaps we cannot say what created their open-minded, critical thinking. Maybe it was the experience of living in the borderlands that drew the participants to be around open-minded, politicized people. Regardless, this is a positive attribute which they could link to their mixed race lives.

For educators and parents, perhaps one of the more important points to take from these stories is the validation these women found from creating community with other

mixed race people. Having other mixed race people to connect with helped them to feel validated and better understand their unique biracial experiences. In addition, as was noted in the last chapter, these women often found safety in diverse, eclectic groups and comfort with a variety of bicultural people. Educators and parents can assist mixed race children in creating healthy racial/ethnic identities by providing them access to mixed race role models, cultivating a diverse community, and providing opportunities for connection with other mixed race people. However, it is important to allow mixed people to create their own mixed race communities.

In addition, these women found comfort in knowing about their cultural backgrounds. The levels of connection that participants felt to their languages, heritages, personal histories, and cultural ways of being, often times influenced their sense of agency. Participants appreciated their connections to family languages, traditions, and foods. As such, parents who make a concerted effort to pass on ethnic culture may be assisting their mixed race children in their abilities to navigate diversity and challenges to identity.

I argue that these women *learn* fluidity; they learn how to navigate distinct cultural groups. However, it is important to note that these women had access to learning the skills needed to navigate structural and institutional constraints not only because they were mixed, but specifically because they were mixed part white. Their whiteness helped to provide them access to enter white spaces and white conversations. This topic of how whiteness operated in these women's lives will be addressed in the following two chapters.

### **Forced “Passing”: Being Perceived as White**

*I don't want people to think I'm white... I think as far as passing, I don't know that I really look white but people think I'm white a lot, but most people don't think I'm black. I think it's weird. Because I think you have to put up with a lot of bullshit...It's kind of a weird position because people will tell you things to your face about your own race.*

–Bobbi

*Some people are going to think I'm white, some people are not. I don't really have control over that. I try to just make that their issue and their problem.* –Marta

*And I think ever since I was younger I haven't felt comfortable. But it's kind of like I don't have much of a choice. I pass. So what I do is I'm an ally.* - Tina

Discussions about whiteness permeated several of the interviews, in particular, reflections on passing. In the next chapter, I will delve into the complexity of whiteness in relation to these women's lives and their philosophies of what whiteness entails and how it is enacted. First, however, I discuss passing. How are these women perceived in relation to whiteness and how do they perceive themselves?

Tackling the topic of passing before delving into the participants' deeper discussions on whiteness feels important because of the historical significance and attention placed on passing as white. Many writings about passing have emphasized instances where individuals chose to pass as white (Kroeger, 2003; Larsen, 2003; Pfeiffer, 2003). As a result of this history many people, both white people and people of color, assume that people who can pass for white would want to pass for white. As revealed in the earlier chapter on identity formation, the women had various ways they identified themselves, but none of the participants considered themselves, or wanted to be

considered, white. Nonetheless, all but three of the participants were at times perceived to be white by others. The women had varying experiences with passing from almost always being labeled as white by others to almost never being assumed to be white.

### **Imposed “Passing”**

The irony of not wanting to be associated with whiteness is that the majority of us pass for white in terms of skin color, at least in some situations. Thirteen of the sixteen participants have been identified in some instances by others as white and/or of European descent; I, too, am often identified as white by others. Degrees of passing among us varied. Some women were almost always identified as white, others were only identified as white in certain situations or by certain groups of people. “Passing” is a loaded term that does not exactly fit in relation to these women in most circumstances. According to the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, passing, in relation to ethnicity is, “a member of one ethnic group presenting themselves as a member of another” (2006, Pass, ¶ 3). Overall, these women did not and would not *choose* to pass as white in most situations. They were identified as white by others. These women did not purposefully try to present themselves as white as much as they were perceived to be white by others by virtue of their skin color. Nonetheless, passing – if the definition is expanded from not only presenting as white but also being perceived as white by others – occurred in their lives. To accentuate the distinction, I will put the term “passing” in quotes when it refers to imposed passing rather than chosen passing.

### **Almost Always Assumed to be White**

Tina, Elizabeth, and Mindy identified themselves as almost always perceived as white by others who had not yet gotten to know them. This affected how they identified

themselves. In the second individual interview I asked Tina how she identifies and if that changes over time. She said,

Maybe it depends on what it's for but mostly I just pick, if it's there, Latino or Chicano. I don't know. I don't know how to explain it. I can't do it very well. It seems like, I could stand in for representation, but not a true representation, but an alternate representation. I think if, I don't know how to explain it. I just don't feel like saying I'm white is correct, and I don't think Latina's correct either. I just feel like Latina is a more attempting of a more diverse background, at least for me. But sometimes when I pick white, I usually do it because my [Latino] last name's going to be on it, I know that that's going to be a little marker of biraciality. I don't know. It is very, very difficult. I wish people would understand that. I think that's why there needs to be more education. Not because I'm calling people out to be more pc or anything, just thinking that this is something that truly affects somebody. Just as gender affects people who are trans, or you know, just as the questions of what is your sexual orientation, are you gay or are you straight, and it's like but that doesn't include everything that anybody could be. It's the same thing. It makes you question your identity, and re-question your identity. And because there's always demographic sheets that say pick only one, it's like you are constantly go through this evaluation of yourself and your identity.

I asked Tina what was so painful about having to choose and she said,

I think it's just the having to split yourself up like that. Half yourself. And choosing which side of you, you want to represent. Or which side of you you feel is you, because you can't pick both pieces to make you a whole. Which is, it's so unfair, it's so unfair. I mean, obviously our country is a litany of unfair and unreasonable demands on people who are different. It's just one of those things that you can't expect people to call into question. I don't know. It's just all these things that come into that decision that should be so simple. And that's what's so agonizing about it, because you really have to spend time evaluating yourself. And it just doesn't seem right or fair.

I asked her, "So when you evaluate yourself, what do you find?" She answered,

I don't know. It's different every time. I mean for the most part, it's kind of like, because I appear as white, I can pass for white, I grew up in a mainstream white household, that, there are times when that part, the nagging part in the back of my head says you have to represent this [Latina] side of yourself also because that's what makes you dynamic, that's what makes you you. You have all this white culture and this white appearance, but there are other factors in there that make you the different person that you are. I think the agony is do I really want to shoulder that, represent biraciality? Or do I just want to say whatever, especially when I'm applying to schools or when I did the census, voting. It's how someone

perceives you. It's a minute little question that is so loaded. And when they look at it, it's a minute scary generalization and that's it, it's over, there's no conversation.

In the group interview Tina said, "I think that it's really hard for me because I pass as white all the time everywhere, every day. Even if I am with my Mexican family. It's also unbearable because I'm a Valley girl, I'm a white girl." Tina doesn't want to be viewed as *just* white but that is how others perceive her because of her light skin and because of how she talks, like "a Valley girl." She doesn't feel she has a choice; she said, "And I think ever since I was younger I haven't felt comfortable. But it's kind of like I don't have much of a choice. I pass." Tina struggled with this perceived identity. To cope, she uses her perceived whiteness to be an ally to people of color.

When I walk into a café, I don't want to represent a stereotypical white middle class person. I want to represent a biracial woman who grew up in two different households, both of which were working class and both of which had different cultural positions but both of which have combined themselves and made me. And I sympathize and empathize more with the workers in the café. And I'd rather talk to them and spend time with them, than people of privilege that would just class me in their same loop. And it's totally wrong. But at the same time, I don't know if I want to say advocate, but I want to be someone to help, you know? It's kinda like, I don't want to take a top down approach and go in and swoop these workers out of their bad conditions, because I don't even know if they're bad. But I want to be like, I find them to be more interesting and more on my level. They would have conversations that would make more sense to me than people who aren't really conscious of the struggles people go through.

I asked Tina what her vision of being helpful entailed. She explained that, for example when she bartends, she tells the people (of color) who work in the kitchen that if they break something or if something goes wrong that they can blame it on her because she knows that she won't really get in trouble but they will. She said,

I drop and break glasses all the time; it's no problem for me. I guess just, making friends and making allies with people. I'm using my position of privilege and power, not making boat loads of money and exploiting more laborers or more people but rather siphoning it back into something better.



Tina also spends time tutoring African-American and Latina girls in Palo Alto and in that role her main goal is to, “Be a listener, give them a voice and space to talk. And show them that I am an ally, that I’m trying to bridge that connection.” Tina “passes” everywhere she goes; she is perceived as white. Although she doesn’t primarily identify as white, and in fact in several instances in her interviews talked about how she considers herself primarily Mexican, she recognized that other people identify her that way. She takes her liminal space as a white-looking, Mexican-identified person and uses her white privilege to be an ally to people of color. However, as she does that she also distinguishes herself as different from the people of color with whom she interacts because it is not on an equal level; it is as a person who has a position of power in relation to those around her. So, in her attempt to connect with people of color she is inadvertently separating herself from them.

Like Tina, Mindy is also perceived as white almost all the time. In fact she and Tina are the only two participants who did not identify themselves as people of color because they acknowledge that they are considered to be white by most people. Mindy, whose mom is Filipina and dad is white, doesn’t feel like she was raised with or understands white culture in a way that others expect her to, which places her in awkward positions. She said,

I think what's hardest for me, especially since I came here to college, is understanding what whiteness was. Because I pass for white, and that's what most people expect from me, is what is normative. And that is, is to be white. And the experiences I have are very limited as to what whiteness was.

Thus Mindy finds herself in situations with white people in which there is an expectation that she will behave in a certain way or have a shared understanding of something. When

she doesn't meet those expectations, it is disappointing to the white people with whom she is interacting, and to her. Mindy described an experience of being in a film class and everyone had to name a comfort food. She named a traditional Filipino dish and people laughed at her. This was hard for her, she said, "When people find that your experiences are so odd or they have some nervous laughter or a reaction, it's like after awhile, you don't want to go out of your way to relate to people." As someone who is more of a loner, she tends to avoid interacting with people, in part for fear that they will have expectations of her that she won't meet. She fears being laughed at again. Instead, as mentioned earlier, she has found community online.

Another aspect of being perceived as white that she finds distressing includes how whiteness is privileged by her mom and other Filipinos. Mindy is well read in terms of history and politicized around race issues. She understands that favoring whiteness is tied to a history of colonization and white supremacy. Consequently it is troubling to her, rather than affirming, that her whiteness is admired by her mom.

It's disturbing to be a white skinned daughter too, you know? Like my mom and Filipinos have this light skinned thing, this color struck thing, that is hard to talk about, you know? I remember skin whitening creams.

However, even as she is admired for her whiteness, as a brown haired, brown eyed girl she still was not as white looking as her mom hoped she would be. Mindy said, "Like my mom she was always saying, oh, you know, I was always hoping for a blue-eyed, blond baby." Mindy is caught in this trap of being admired for her whiteness by her mom and other Filipinos while simultaneously being ostracized by white people for not being white enough.

Elizabeth, too, is also almost always assumed to be white by others. Like, Mindy, she is also mixed Filipina and white and is situated in a culture that values whiteness. Recall that Elizabeth described how both her family and wider Filipino culture exalt mixed race people who are mixed with white. However, Elizabeth does not have the same critical analysis of the favoring of whiteness and consequently views her experiences of being favored positively. Elizabeth said, “Most white people see me as white.” Elizabeth also perceived herself as white until she was about 14 or 15, only then did she start to think more in racial terms. She remembers her mom saying to her not to act like an American student; they were lazy and had no respect. Elizabeth recalls that when she was little she was “really proud of having a mom from the Philippines. Although I didn’t understand there was a racial component to that.” She also didn’t associate Filipinos with other Asians.

It wasn’t until she reached her teen years that she started to recognize herself as a child of an immigrant, only then did she identify as Asian. Even then, she was defining herself “in contrast” to her predominately white classmates who she perceived as “lazy Americans.” Elizabeth didn’t have a close relationship with the white side of her family. She had extended family from the Philippines live with her so she felt a connection to her Filipino culture. She is one of the few people who describe her experiences as a mixed race woman as overwhelmingly positive. One of the contrasting factors between her story and Mindy’s is that she perceived both her whiteness and her Asianness as positive. Mindy found her whiteness, and it’s associations to colonialism and white supremacy troubling. And her Filipino identity made her stand out among whites in an uncomfortable way. Although both Mindy and Elizabeth stated that there were few

Asians in the towns they grew up in, for Mindy it became something that separated her from others. For Elizabeth, for the most part, it did not make her stand out. In addition there were class factors that added to Elizabeth's sense of comfort with her mixed identity. Elizabeth's mom was brought from the Philippines to be a teacher in her town because there were no qualified teachers who wanted to teach in her working class town. The few "foreigners" in the town were often professionals and revered and appreciated for the services they provided. It placed Elizabeth in a socioeconomic status above most of her classmates whereas Mindy found herself in situations, for example with wealthy white people at Smith College in which she felt she did not measure up. Although she never used the words explicitly, there was a sense from Mindy's stories that she was made to feel less than those around her.

The experiences for these women who were perceived most often as white varied greatly. For Elizabeth, it brought her a sense of stability and privilege. For Tina, it caused continual angst in thwarting her desire to connect with other Latinos. For Mindy, it caused internal conflict as she was uncomfortable with the praise she received from Filipinos for her whiteness and insecure about the ostracism she experienced with white people.

### **Frequently Perceived to be White, but Not Always**

Other participants were assumed to be white or of European descent frequently, but not always. This group included Linda, Marta, Bobbi, Joanna, Ana, and Susan. I would include myself in this group as well. Linda, who is Japanese and white, for example said,

I think I pass for white a lot, or if not that way then as the harmless Asian, you know, like Asians are not threatening. So like, I think oftentimes, by strangers on

the street, I'm exoticized. People are like, "oh what are you?" I think that's common.

Her description shows that sometimes she was identified as white, sometimes not. As will be described further in the next chapter, the frequency with which Linda was assumed to be white forced her to more deeply examine her white privilege.

Bobbi, who is Somali and white, in the group interview said, "In Africa they think I'm white person." Then later in the interview she added,

I think as far as passing, I don't know that I really look white but people think I am white a lot, but most people don't think I'm black. I think it's weird. Because I think you have to put up with a lot of bullshit. They don't think you're that so they just say things. To me I never felt culturally white. I don't feel that I physically look white but people do think that. I've never had an African-American person tell me I look white, but people think I look white, some white people think I look white, and some Latino people think I look white. It's kind of a weird position because people will tell you things to your face about your own race. Maybe it's because Phoenix is a very racist society. Maybe that doesn't happen out here (in the Bay Area) as much... That was the main thing for me. I don't want people to think I'm white.

Bobbi had the experience of being perceived as white in Africa, but not among African-Americans. It was more often whites, and Latinos, who assumed she was white. Bobbi's comment speaks to one of the painful aspects of being perceived as white as a mixed race person; it made her vulnerable to hearing racist remarks about "her own race," about black people.

It was common among the group for people to have the experience of white people assuming they were white. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Joanna had this experience; most often it was white people who assumed she was white. Joanna talked about how she was perceived differently by different people. However, because she was often assumed to be white by others, that shaped her self-identity. She felt the desire to be included in black circles but appreciated her fluidity to move between groups.

Growing up she had both white friends and black friends and grew up in a black/white racially mixed neighborhood and attended a school with large populations of both white and black students. She explained,

And like there were definitely some racial issues in town but I'd never call it racial tension or anything like that because it was so nonchalant. We would just joke about it all the time. I always got a kick out of it when they included me in it. I have this whole thing in needing to be included and needing to feel like I'm black. So, I'd love it when they'd make some black joke and include me in it. I felt really cool. It's something I still kind of struggle with. It goes against so much of what I believe and stand for, to care so much about what other people think. But I can't shake it, you know?

Especially for those of us who are fair enough to pass, you know? I was talking to a friend about that after [the mixed race] happy hour. Obviously there were a lot of conversations that came up last night that were interesting. And one of the conversations was about the intersection of how I identify myself with how other people identify me and that whole topic. And what I was saying, so much of how I identify myself is based on how people perceive me. Because if I were to walk down to the street and everyone saw a black person, I'd have a completely different internal vision of who I was and whatever. Because my sister and I, we've had conversations every once in awhile about it, and she calls herself black. And she talks about being the only black person in the office. And it always strikes me as funny, but I understand it because she's so much darker than I am. And everyone when you look at her, you think she's black. You might think she's biracial, but you'd never think she's white. And a lot of people think I'm white. Most people think I'm Jewish, that's what I get all the time. That or Latina. But, you know because I can pass so easily without even trying, it's such a huge shaping factor of how I see myself. Because the world hasn't been constantly telling me I'm a minority, I have the freedom to be more fluid about it. Whereas she really doesn't have a choice, because every day the world reminds her. You know?

I asked Joanna how she identifies herself and she responded,

I identify very, very much as mixed, multiracial, biracial. I don't particularly have a strong attachment to any of the words. I use mixed a lot. I call myself a halfie, a hapa, whatever. But that is a very, very big part of who I am. Once in awhile I'll call myself black when it's relevant to the conversation, like if I'm referring to being the only black person in a certain setting. Sometimes it's just easier than saying a person of color or whatever. But, I think that, like, the duality of it is very important to me because I grew up with both of my parents and they are still together. And I'm close to both of their families. I have trouble just calling myself black and denying, it feels to me like denying my father and his family. And I'm not ok with that. And also, it feels like denying a part of who I

am. Especially because I don't look like, you know, being biracial is a big part of how the world views me, because I'm racially ambiguous. And I get upset when other people try to force some identity on me.

Joanna's narrative points to the complexity of passing only part of the time. Although she is assumed to be white at times, she does not ever consider herself only white. Other times she is accepted as black, but that too does not feel comfortable to her, even though she wants acceptance in the black community. Thus, although she passes, her identity is firmly rooted as mixed race and it is important to her that both she and others recognize the "duality" of her identity, her connection to both parents and both sides of her family.

Joanna, however, talked about passing in relation to another social category – sexuality – and had a completely different perspective on passing as straight. Joanna said, "But in terms of, when I think of dating women, it's really important for me to date, to have a partner who can also pass for straight, because it's something that I value in my own life." She talked about this in both the group and individual interviews. In the individual interview I asked challenging questions to try to understand why passing as straight was important and passing as white wasn't. Joanna explained,

I don't care what my partner looks like racially. I don't need a partner that can pass as white. Generally I'm not attracted to white people. But, I think because of the current climate in which we live, in regards to homosexuality, sometimes it's important for people not to know.

Joanna felt discomfort with her own view of wanting to pass and wanting a partner to pass as straight. She even stated, "I offend myself with that statement" and "I think it's horrible of me to think that." Nonetheless, she valued her ability to pass as straight and did not want that to be associated with people assuming that she consequently devalued her sexuality. She elaborated,

Definitely there are things I can see are internalized racism and see how it plays out in my life. But in terms of homophobia, I think I have no problems with the choices I've made in terms of my sexuality. And I think I'm 100% right to do what I think is right and act on it. And I think the people who disagree with me have the right to disagree with me but are wrong if they try to stop me from acting on it. It's like if someone thinks I'm a bad person over it, I think they're just wrong. It doesn't make me doubt myself more. But I don't know. I really like being able to pass. It comes in handy.

Thus, although Joanna did not care to pass in terms of race, the ability to pass was an important issue in Joanna's life in relation to sexuality. Through her stories there was definitely a sense that there was much more danger in encountering homophobia than in encountering racism. Plus, Joanna emphasized wanting to "choose when to bring it up and when not to." She was out in some spaces and not in others. Whereas with race, she never wanted anyone to make the assumption that she was just white and didn't like it much either when people thought of her as only black. It was much more important to her to always be recognized as biracial. There were different levels of risk for her associated with being identified as queer or bisexual versus being associated as black. In the instance of sexuality, she feared losing power by coming out; she did not have that same fear of losing power by defining her mixed racial identity.

Marta, who is Peruvian and white, also had the experience of sometimes being perceived as white and other times being recognized as "Latin." Like Joanna and Bobbi, she found that it was most often white people who assumed she was white. Marta found inner peace with these false assumptions, and didn't allow them to affect how she perceived herself. She explained that growing up among other mixed people and learning the vocabulary in college to define her experience assisted her in claiming her own identity for herself. She shared,



I feel like I got the vocabulary in college to make things make sense. I feel like I am my own way. I was in a neighborhood where there were seven kids who were mixed Latin and white and then a mixed race family moved in a couple of houses down. She was my best friend in the neighborhood. And then in high school I was friends with these two Filipino guys and one of them was mixed. So I just feel that I kind of navigated that. Some people are going to think I'm white, some people are not. I don't really have control over that. I try to just make that their issue and their problem.

Marta recognized that she only had control over her response to people's assumptions, not over the assumptions that others would make of her. She decided to not let other's assumptions affect how she viewed herself. However, at the same time, she recognized the white skin privilege she held and, similar to Tina, she felt it was her responsibility to be an ally to darker skinned people who experienced more racism. Susan, who is Mexican and white, also had the experience of sometimes being perceived as white and other times being assumed to be a person of color, although not always Latina, sometimes other ethnicities such as Turkish, Lebanese, or Pakistani. You may recall her story in the last chapter of being perceived to be the same ethnicity of whatever group of people with whom she associates. Like Marta, she also seemed to find peace with others assumptions, recognizing that it is other's ignorance, more so than anything about herself, that caused others to make incorrect assumptions about her. Susan claims a Chicana identity primarily. Chicana works, she says, "because it's very inclusive, it doesn't necessitate any particular racial makeup. You can be mixed and still be Chicana, because of course that's been going on for hundreds of years." She also considered herself to be mixed race.

Ana also had the experience of being perceived as white by white people and recognized as "something" by other mixed people and people of color. She refers to herself as "ambiguously beige" and said,

I'm not as obviously racially something. Talking with other folks who are mixed race, we're used to walking into a room and saying, oh I can tell that person is kind of mixed, or light skinned black or whatever. I think because I'm not obviously something, folks treat me in a general way they treat other folks, which for the most part was how they would treat white folks. It wasn't quite passing but it there is some degree of acceptance or privilege that goes along with that. The more stuff I've had to deal with has been about my age in a professional context or being queer.

Ana wasn't always sure how people perceived her, but she didn't feel that she was treated in ways were different for those around her signifying that she may have passed for several races. For Ana, race was not as big of an issue as other social positionalities such as age and sexuality.

I, too, am sometimes perceived as white and other times perceived as "something" although people don't often know what that "something" is, unless I pronounce a word in Spanish. Similar to the experiences of many participants, it is most often white people who assume that I am white and people of color who recognize that I am "something." Because I speak Spanish and have often worked with Latino/a communities, that often serves as a marker of my Latina identity. However, frequently others assume I'm white. I feel most comfortable claiming a biracial identity, but I consider myself Latina as well. It is important to me to connect with other Latinas, and I never consciously desire to pass as white.

Those of us who frequently pass, but not always, have the experience of visibly straddling racial/ethnic borderlands. None of the participants expressed a desire to pass as white, but Joanna mentioned explicitly that she enjoyed the fluidity of her identity. All the participants but Ana discussed a struggle to understand their ethnic positioning in relation to the assumptions of others. For some people, like Linda, Bobbi, and Joanna, it

posed continual challenges to self-identity. For others, like Marta and Susan, they worked to not let others assumptions affect how they viewed themselves.

### **Rarely, but Sometimes Perceived to be White**

Maria, Janet, Diana, and Katherine were sometimes assumed to be white, but rarely. Two of the women were most often identified as their racial/ethnic background of color. Maria is most often recognized as Latina or Mexican. However, sometimes she is mistaken for other ethnicities as well, as she described in the narrative used as the opening for the previous chapter. Diana is most often assumed to be Black. Janet and Katherine are recognized most often as not being white, but most people are not sure what their racial/ethnic background might be.

Maria is a fairly light skinned Latina, and she looks like her Mexican family in terms of her features. She has a Spanish last name and, no matter what context she is in, she pronounces her first name with a Spanish accent rather than an English accent. As such, as soon as she introduces herself to anyone, they will most likely assume that she is Latina. However, there are times, because of her light skin (and people's ignorance) when she does not share her name that others assume she is white. She recognizes that her name is a huge marker of her Latina identity and wonders how her life might be different if she didn't have a Spanish name.

Like I said earlier, like my name, I have a brown name. I don't know what my life would be like if I had gone through with a different name and having to explain myself in a different way. Nobody asks me to explain, like there are so many assumptions made around people of color in the US today.

As a result, Maria is firm in her Latina/Chicana/Mexican identity, although she claims a mixed race identity as well. Nonetheless, as described in earlier chapters, she at times has struggled with simultaneous challenges to her Latina identity.

Diana is a light-skinned black woman. At age 56, having been raised in an earlier generation when “1 drop of black blood” made you black, she claimed and still claims a black identity, although more recently she claims a mixed identity as well. Although most often people recognize her as a black woman, sometimes people assume that she is white. Other times people are not sure what her background is, as her narrative in the last chapter about the incident with the racist gas station attendant attests. During the time she was interviewed, Diana had dyed her hair blond and found that she was treated differently by white people who then assumed she was white. In the group interview, in response to a comment Mindy had made about white people expecting her to act white, Diana said,

That's actually happened to me since I've dyed my hair blond. There is this big shift with white people. They all strike up these conversations and they're so embracing of me. Whereas before that didn't happen.

Diana never desired to pass as white but, as someone who held a high powered business position, she recognized that she was expected to look and act as white as possible in order to succeed in the business world. Later in the group interview she explained why she did not want to pass as white. She shared,

That's exactly why I don't want to be white. Because I'm at home in my ethnic culture. I feel a warmth, acceptance. I feel happiness, as opposed to putting on this façade and straightening your hair, and speaking the King's English and having collard greens, or whatever it is. There's so much effort to pretend, that I just want to relax and do what I enjoy with people I like.

Because Diana felt culturally black and needed to physically alter her hair to “appear white” she did not desire to be white; for her, identifying with whiteness was a façade. This was especially true for her because she was raised as a black person, in a black

neighborhood, and attended predominately black schools in a time where mixed race black people were considered to be black.

Janet has brown skin but was raised as a young child in a predominately white neighborhood and thought of herself as white as a child. Others sometimes knew she was part Mexican, but her identity wasn't always clear to people. She explained,

And so one of the things I remember from when I was young, was my friend saying to me, like always complimenting me on my skin, you know, and wanting to be tan like me. Not necessarily wanting to be a brown person, but like wanting to be like who they are, but tanner, you know? They'd say things like, "How do you stay like that? Like how do you tan so well?"

It was clear to her that her brown skin was only desirable when linked to a white identity. Although Janet thought of herself primarily as white when she was a young, her identity has been shifting and she now identifies as a woman of color, as Latina, and as mixed race. Throughout her life, most often people wonder what she is and don't know what to assume. She added later in her interview,

So yeah, based on that I think people, I mean strangers, see me in all sorts of different ways. And then I feel like I've had some friends that have seen me as white, too. For sure. I have a white friend, who used to live here, who's definitely one of my best friends, and maybe she's just starting to think about race a little more or something, but she moved back in town recently, and something came up, and she asked me...she was kind of like, like it was just hitting her, she was like "wow, you're like a brown person." Or "you definitely identify yourself as a person of color don't you?" And I said, "Yes."

Because Janet was white identified in some ways, her friends who had known her when she was younger perceived her as white. However, her changing self-identity is causing others to perceive her differently.

Janet is one of the participants who frequently got asked, "What are you?" She said, "I remember having to answer that question a lot." She feels that she is at a crossroads in her identity formation. She said,

I think, I mean, just the more I talk about this and think about how my identity has changed, I really see myself changing a lot in the next few years, and I don't know exactly like where I'll go with that. But I definitely feel like something is rising up in me, and I don't really know like where that's going to go, or what I'm going to do with that, but I think there's just a lot of things that I have to figure out around my identity too. And like also reconciling like where I come from too, and like where I lived and the experiences that I've had. It's like I need...I just think there's some way I need to deal with those to kind of like settle them. Not like necessarily bury them, but just like to make peace with them, and to like really think more about like who I'm going to become and what I'm going to do with my knowledge, too, you know. I definitely see like media being a part of that. And I'm really interested in other people sharing those stories, and that's definitely one thing that I want to do. But I definitely feel like this change coming on, and it's like slow, but I feel it coming.

Janet's transition to living in a city with many brown people and working in an organization with a social justice orientation have positioned her in a place in which she is able to critically reflect on her experiences and her ethnic/racial identity. For Janet, it appears as if her immersion in a white community is what contributed to her perceiving herself as white. Because she has brown skin and a brown last name, in another context she might have never identified as white and passed.

Katherine is perhaps the most racially ambiguous of the participants. She is Joanna's sister and is mixed black and white. Although Joanna said of Katherine "you'd never think she's white," Katherine herself recognized that there were times when people thought she might be of European descent. I asked Katherine, "How do you think others perceive you?" She responded,

Well, looking at me I don't know, because just judging from the questions people have asked me. A lot of times people ask me what I am, I say they should guess. I've gotten called everything. I get spoken Spanish to a lot. People guess I'm from the Middle East somewhere, Mediterranean, Mexican, things like that, Filipino. I've studied abroad in Japan, I've had people ask me if I'm part Japanese. People have said all kinds of different things in terms of my appearance. Definitely black people see me as mixed, part black, although I know black people who are surprised. In terms of how people see me, my internalized identity, I don't even know.

Thus, Katherine was and is constantly questioned about her identity and people make a myriad of assumptions about her ethnic and racial background, putting her in the position of constantly having to identify herself. Her most common response is, “I’m just mixed black and white.” She added, “If the person gives me a bad feeling in the way they ask and I don’t want to talk about it much, I might just say, ‘I’m mixed.’”

Katherine’s best friends in high school were black, and she identifies as black but she was still nervous about being accepted by her black high school friends and often felt she had to “prove” herself. She explained,

I wanted to be accepted by my black friends. Even though I know they did. In high school they always did at the time. In high school there was a lot of struggles with that. I remember being pretty nervous about that at different times during different conversations. Sort of like I had to prove something. Getting really sensitive to little comments. I remember one time one of my friends was dating this boy, and some of other friends were talking about it, about her dating a white boy. And I was like, it’s not right that she’s dating a white boy? And I realized I should be careful of what I do and what does that mean with who I’m around. But I never said anything about it to them.

Katherine, as a result of feeling she needed to prove herself, worked hard to understand and fit in with the culture of the black girls around her and was cautious about what she shared. Katherine’s first boyfriend was white and having heard her friends’ thoughts on dating white guys, she didn’t want to introduce him because she feared her friends would then perceive her as white. She elaborated,

A lot of times, in terms of dating or what groups I hang out with, I definitely notice I have felt that people see those choices that I make as the choice of my identity. If I date a white person then it’s my preference to be white. I don’t think I’ve consciously thought that much, but that’s been a concern that I have.

For Katherine, she was worried that not only would her friends disapprove of her choices but that they would then believe she wanted to be white and thus not accept her in their black community. She said, “I still feel like I have to prove myself.”

Katherine shared this story of being questioned about her identity by a black woman:

Funny I was talking to a friend the other day. She’s black. And when we had first met, we were taking the same class for awhile before we actually talked to each other. And one of the first times we talked, she asked me what’s my ethnic background. The other day we were talking about how there’s a lot, quite a number of people who can’t interact with me until they know the answer to that question. And she, and that wasn’t what always bothered me. And she said, yeah, for her, she felt really uncomfortable around me until she knew. And the reason was that she grew up as a black girl being taught that you present yourself a certain way with white people and you present yourself a certain way with black people. You’re kind of a different person around different people. She didn’t know who to be around me because she didn’t know who I was and she didn’t know what I would expect of her and what she could say to me.

Although this statement was disturbing to Kristen she understood it, especially in the context of racism. Black people learn to act a certain way around white people for survival. Katherine admitted that she learned the same. Although Katherine never tried to pass as white and consciously claimed both black and biracial identities, she recognized that there were different ways of acting culturally that helped her gain greater acceptance in each community. Her story provides insight into why people might ask about racial and ethnic background – so in turn they know how to act.

Katherine also traveled to several Asian countries and had a strong appreciation for diversity. She said,

I definitely feel the need to have a lot of friends of color, and black friends. What’s important for me is that all the friends I have allow me to feel like I feel closer to myself around all of them.

In other words, it was important for her to find friends with whom she could be herself.

Sometimes that was difficult when she battled challenges to her identity. When she was



dating a white man, she particularly had trepidation admitting to her black friends that she was involved with a white man. Traveling gave her some reprieve from being constantly confronted around her racial identity. She said, when she was in Japan she “felt relieved.” She said, “I didn’t need to think about racial identity because I was American.” She felt and was recognized as “American” above all else, and although that brought it’s challenges it was a welcome respite from the constant racial identity challenges she faced in the United States.

Thus for Katherine, she was almost never perceived as white by others but she was rarely recognized as being mixed black and white. She never desired to pass for white; on the contrary she worried about passing as black. One of her biggest challenges has been constantly facing identity challenges and questions.

Although all these women were rarely assumed to be white, all of them had the experience and thus understanding of what it meant to be treated as white. However, for this group, those moments were often fleeting. Diana’s description of the treatment she received by white people as a blond, in contrast to her experiences with white people as a black woman, begin to provide a glimpse into the distinction between the experiences of white people and people of color, especially in how they are treated by white people. Although these women were rarely perceived as white, three of them – Maria, Janet, Katherine – struggled with authenticating to others their connection to their heritages of color as they faced challenges to their identities. Diana, having been firmly rooted in an all black community as a child, did not describe the same challenges to proving her black identity, but she described being forced to act and look more white in order to maintain

her job. Thus all of them were constantly facing challenges to their identities and being asked to prove themselves in certain ways.

### **Never Assumed to be White**

Only three participants said they never pass for white – Brittney, Alana, and Ruth. All of them are mixed black and white and all of them have dark skin. They recognized that they would never pass as white in terms of skin color. Two of them – Alana and Ruth – approached the concept of passing from slightly different angles than the rest of the group. Brittney did not discuss passing at all.

Alana said, “Okay, so growing up, being around my father, it was a blunt reminder to myself and other people that I was black, even though, you know, I would never pass as white.” Yet, Alana felt that having a white mother provided her with a “sort of affirmation” and “a sort of power.” It brought her “cultural whiteness” (as described in the fluidity chapter) which helped her to navigate culturally white institutions such as academia. Thus although she could never pass for white, she recognizes that she still benefits from white privilege. With shame, Alana admits that in school, as a result of wanting to fit in and survive in a predominately white space, she tried to do what she could to fit in with her white peers. As discussed in the Outsider/Insider chapter, as a result of internalized racism, she really wanted to be “associated with white folk.”

In contrast, Ruth discussed how she resists passing in all forms. Although she doesn’t have the capacity to pass for white, she could pass for straight and uses that as an example of how she resists passing in general. She said,

Passing in general is something that I really resist. I don't like passing for straight, because I'm not straight, and whenever I start getting male attention I freak out and I have to like, to do something.

She speculates, "And I think if I were lighter, and passed for white, perhaps I would still feel the need to make sure everybody upfront knew [I was mixed]." Ruth has no desire to pass. Ruth, throughout her stories, stands out in her bravery to be herself in whatever situation she is in, even when her ways of being stand in contrast to those around her. Recall, for example, her story of being beat up after school by students who didn't want to accept her, the "punk rocker black girl."

Alana, Ruth, and Brittney all lived in different cities. Although Alana and Ruth could not pass for white, both of them thought critically about the issue of passing in relation to their lives. Brittney never talked about passing in relation to her life. This could be due, in part, to the fact that passing was not discussed explicitly in the Albuquerque group interview. Passing was discussed in both the Boston and Oakland group interviews. Brittney is also younger, less political, and less formally educated than either Ruth or Alana.

## **Conclusion**

There are a few things to note in these women's stories about their connection to passing. First, none of the women consciously chose to pass as white. It was imposed upon them. The participants chose different ways to identify – sometimes as mixed, sometimes in relation to their heritage of color, sometimes switching between the two – but none of them wanted to be perceived as white.

Second, the degree to which they were not taken to be white did not necessarily correlate directly with their connection to their heritages of color and their security in

their identity. There were participants in each category on the continuum of “passing” as white that felt secure in their identities – Elizabeth, Marta, Diana, and Ruth for example. There were also women – such as Tina, Linda, Janet, and Alana - who struggled with their self-identities in each category. In other words being perceived as white didn’t necessarily make people question their identities of color and/or mixed race identities and being perceived as a person of color didn’t necessarily make participants feel secure in their identities as people of color and mixed race women. Some of the women internalized others’ perceptions and subsequently questioned their identity claims – Tina, Mindy, and Janet, for example. Other women, such as Elizabeth, Marta, and Ruth, learned how to disengage from others’ challenges and stand firm in their identities.

Third, being perceived as white created both pain and privilege. There were several stories acknowledging the privilege of being taken as white. Elizabeth, for example, talked about how the Filipinos in her life valued whiteness. Linda acknowledged that her whiteness brought her privilege. Diana talked about the greater degree of acknowledgement she received from white people when she dyed her hair blond and was perceived as white. Yet, being perceived as white also brought pain. Mindy, for example, was expected to perform whiteness in certain ways by white people and when she did not live up to the expectations she felt ostracized. In addition, although her whiteness was revered by her Filipina mom, because she acknowledged the link to colonialism and white supremacy, the praise she got was painful for her. Bobbi talked about the painful consequence of hearing negative comments about her own race. Janet discussed the confusion she felt in forming her identity as a person singled out for her brown skin. Oftentimes passing for white is automatically associated with privilege, yet

because of the continuing presence of white supremacy, for these mixed race women “passing” as white also brought pain and struggle.

Fourth, as has been a theme throughout all the chapters thus far, the women’s identities shifted in different situations. There were many stories of how they learned to act in distinct ways for the situations they encountered. Katherine, for example, explained that she learned to act differently among white and black people. Diana also shared stories of how she was expected to act (speaking the “King’s English”) and look a certain way (straightened hair) to succeed in business with white people..

Fifth, passing was an issue in these women’s lives not only in terms of “passing” as white but also in relation to passing as people of color. Several of the women shared stories of anxiety about being fully accepted by their communities of color and/or being accepted as people of color in general. While passing as white was not important to these women, being accepted as people of color, as Latina, as black, and Asian, for example, was important.

Sixth, although passing in terms of race related to all these women’s lives in some way, there was another issue of passing that was raised – passing as straight. Although there are eight queer, bisexual, or lesbian women in the group, only two discussed passing in terms of sexuality. They fell on opposite sides of the spectrum in relation to their values about passing for straight. Ruth said that she resists passing overall, and Joanna said that it is important that both she and her partner be able to pass for straight. For Joanna, she feared homophobia much more than she feared racism.

Passing is a complex issue because it is tied to issues of power and privilege. Although race is a social construct (Omi & Winant, 1994), the effects of racism are real

in their consequences. As much as we might like to believe that we are the creators of our fates, the possibilities to which we have access are constrained to some extent by the social categories to which we belong, race being one of these. Race and hierarchy “are indelibly wed” (Dalton, 2002). Unfortunately, whites are often blinded by issues of race and unable or unwilling to see themselves in racial terms (Dalton, 2002). Nonetheless, this does not stop many white people from believing that their ways of being are the best, most effective ways of being, creating an expectation that they assume others that, if given the chance, they would want to be perceived as white.

Throughout history there have been attempts by mixed people and people of color to be considered white in hopes of gaining access to white privilege. Other times a label of “white” has been imposed upon people. Since the start of the colonized United States, blacks have been assigned a subordinate status to whites. In addition, the racial designation “black” was placed upon anyone with “one drop of black blood.” However, now that the social construction of race is more widely accepted, the one drop rule is losing ground. Racial categories have developed and changed over time as white scientists have coded certain physical differences as belonging to distinct *types* of individuals (Spickard, 1992).

Just as the categorization of blacks has changed over time, so have the categorizations and rights of various Asian ethnic groups. For example, Chinese people were not eligible for citizenship until 1952 even though Chinese laborers had been contracted to come to the United States beginning in the early 1950s (Takaki, 1997). Similarly, the definitions and distinctions of “Hispanics” have fluctuated over time. Mexican Americans, for example, “were accorded the racial status of white people”

however “socially, politically, and economically...they were treated as non-Whites” (Foley, 2002, p. 49). Thus, although “Hispanic” is officially, according to government designations, an ethnic category comprised of Mexicans, Colombians, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans and other Latino ethnic groups, Latino people have historically been treated as non-Whites (Foley, 2002).

Although individual white people may not acknowledge individual and institutional white privilege, whiteness is nonetheless linked to institutional power and privilege (Johnson, 1997). As a result, various people of color throughout history have tried to gain access to white identities and white privilege. One might assume that people would choose to gain access to privilege whenever possible. However, the women in this study provide several examples of the ways in which they reject white racial identities. That said, it is important to acknowledge that majority of these women *have the privilege* of rejecting white identities. For most of us, even if we reject imposed white identities, there are still several ways in which we may benefit from white privilege regardless. The complex issue of whiteness will be further addressed in the next chapter.

## **Secret Agent Insiders to White People: Cultural Whiteness, Disdain for Whiteness, Denying Whiteness, and Reconciling Whiteness**

*I feel like I'm the secret agent insider to white people because my family's white. But I don't feel like I'm a white person. – Bobbi*

The excerpt below is a conversation from the Oakland group interview that begins to illuminate the complexity of whiteness in relation to these women's lives.

Bobbi: Like I don't consider my mom a racist person. I consider her a white person who has xenophobia as part of her culture. Like how my mom doesn't get it [racism], when I really need her to understand that someone is being messed up to me at the straw market in the Bahamas. I don't think that's racism, I just think that she's a white person and she's not seeing it. You think that's racism?

Alana: Yes I do.

Bobbi: I just think that's their culture.

Alana: It's a racist culture. It's part of white supremacy.

Bobbi: Have you guys ever read Cheikh Anta Diop? He's an anthropologist. He has a theory called the "two cradle theory." It's all about how people evolved in a society with limited resources. European people evolved only caring about their family unit, and all their stuff.<sup>12</sup> To me I just don't think it's something to change, I think it's just natural. That's just how they are.

Linda: So when you grow up with scarcity that produces xenophobia?

Bobbi: Yeah.

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<sup>12</sup> Professor Jacob Carruthers of Northeastern University wrote a review for the Spring 1977 edition of Black Books Bulletin that gave the following summary Dr. Diop's thesis:

The theory in brief is that the severe climate and environment of Europe and Asia caused biological and cultural changes in the original human type resulting in the loss of pigmentation biologically and the development of an individualistic, xenophobic, aggressive, nomadic culture among the white isolates, in contrast to the cooperative, xenophilic, peaceful, sedentary culture among the blacks who still inhabited the more benign climatic and environmental zones.

Not only did nature fashion the instincts, habits and ethical concepts of the two subdivisions before they met after a long separation, Dr Diop's Theory also claims that these early molds had permanent effects on the two civilizations which have endured until the present time. (p. 43)



Silvia: How you define xenophobia?

Bobbi: People that hate outsiders, people like, and not just people that are distrustful, but people who hate them. I was telling you how I can't even read books by white people any more. Like a book will be about something totally different like Virginia Woolf or Hemingway and they always got to be talking shit about somebody. Nobody else [but white people] would write like that. It's like an obsession with other people and putting them down.

Silvia: How do you reconcile that with the white people in your life that you love? How do you reconcile believing it's just the way they are, like your mom?

Bobbi: Well I love my mom. And I think my mom is like, you know, special. She's not like that. I don't know. I don't think about it.

Marta: How do we reconcile that that is us?

Silvia: Yeah, that's a deeper question.

Linda: That is me. And that is why I'm trying to reconcile that. And like, you know, that is me, for sure. Maybe not to that degree, but there are times when I catch myself, and I'm like, whoa!

Alana: Yeah.

Linda: I feel like it's outside myself, you know? But it's not, it is me.

Many aspects of whiteness – what it is, how it is enacted, who is considered white, disdain for whiteness, denying whiteness, recognizing whiteness in actions, white racism, white supremacy – arose in several individual interviews and were a large part of the conversation in two group interviews. In the exchange above, a dialogue that occurred in the middle of the Oakland group interview, the women are grappling with the complexity of what it means to recognize the negativity of white cultural ways of being (as some of them see it) in both family members and in themselves. There is a desire to externalize whiteness – to speak about it from an outsider perspective. Bobbi is struggling in this dialogue to reconcile her mom's ignorance around issues of racism, denying that her mom is racist. Instead she argues that xenophobia is a “natural” part of

her mom's white culture. She later defines xenophobia as people that hate and put down outsiders. When I challenge her to explain how she reconciles that in relation to her mom, Bobbi replies that she doesn't think her mom is like that. Her mom is "special." So in the end, her argument unravels. However, reconciling the argument is not what matters most; what the quote reveals is that these women face the challenge of trying to understand white family members' ignorance about and complicity in racism and other negative white cultural ways of being. In addition, they struggle to understand how whiteness relates to their own lives. There is a lot of resistance to owning whiteness to any degree.

As I previously stated, none of the women, including myself, want to be called white. No one identified as white and several stated specifically that they don't consider themselves white. However, all of us have a white parent so we have some connection to whiteness. All but one of the participants were raised at least in part by their white parent, sometimes in addition to their other parent, sometimes as a single parent. In addition, most of us "pass" for white to some degree. Thus, the deep question, as asked by Marta above is, "how do we reconcile our whiteness?" In the individual and group interviews, many of the women provided clear descriptions of the ugliness associated with cultural whiteness. The participants named specific undesirable characteristics of cultural whiteness, and some women expressed a desire to avoid white people whenever possible. Whiteness was associated with white racism and white supremacy, ways of being to which none of us wanted to be related. Yet, some participants delved into the conflict of recognizing cultural whiteness and/or white skin privilege within themselves.

## **Connection to Whiteness**

There were several discussions in which the negative aspects of cultural whiteness were identified. The conflict in defining cultural whiteness occurred when they/we struggled to position our white family members, white partners, white friends, and ourselves in relation to these individual and co-created definitions of whiteness. As a participant observer, I often engaged in these discussions sharing personal stories. As a facilitator, I often challenged the participants to further explain their thinking in terms of how they position themselves in relation to their concepts of whiteness.

In the Oakland group interview, Linda introduced the topic of whiteness early on in the conversation and it remained a theme throughout the interview, as evidenced in the opening dialogue above. Exemplified in the opening quote by Bobbi, most participants talked as if they understood and could define whiteness not as white people, but as “secret agent insiders.” Bobbi was raised primarily by her white mom, giving her insight into whiteness, yet she also grew up with African-Americans and Somali people and as a mixed woman does not identify as white even though she has an intimate connection to whiteness and white people. Alana, who would never pass for white said, “It’s the cultural whiteness that I really identify with.” She grew up around all white people and was raised primarily by her white mom, spending time occasionally with her African-American dad. Having been hurt by many racist white people, Alana stated, “I don’t feel safe in white spaces anymore, but I know how to negotiate with them...I know how to communicate with white folk and I know how to go in and out of their spaces.” Linda chimed in that she also has the same “cultural knowing” of how to be in white spaces.

At that point in the interview, I acknowledged the varying levels of consciousness in the group about race relations and race politics, and added that with that consciousness there appears to be, among the group, “a critique and also lots of anger.” The group responded with lots of “mm-hmms” and then laughter. Linda spoke up naming the sentiment behind the response stating, “Isn’t it interesting that we all like started laughing because I think that there is this nervousness because we all know that one of our parents is white.” She shared a story of going to Bobbi’s house and seeing a picture of Bobbi’s (white, blond, blue-eyed) mom and asking, “Is that your mom?” with perhaps some sort of surprise in her voice. She remembers that Bobbi’s response felt very protective as she said something to the effect of, “yeah, that’s my mom and I love her very much; she’s very important to me.” Linda explained that the nervousness in the group about critiquing whiteness comes from having a real a connection to white people and added, “That dichotomy of how we feel about our own whiteness is really about ourselves.”

This led to another exchange that revealed more about whiteness in relation to their lives:

Bobbi: I feel guilty that I don't feel white. And I feel like I don't know, I was telling you I feel fucked up because if I walk into a room and it's like all white people, I'm like, “oh god.” But if I walk into a room of Filipino people, I feel more comfortable around them. Like if I walk into a job and they're all Korean people, I’m just like, wow okay, that's cool. And it's weird, it's like am I shady, or?

Linda: (interrupting) It’s that we live in a fucked up society where there is a reminder that we have to experience oppression and white supremacy, you know? And if you're not white then you're going to experience some sort of oppression. So of course you are going to be like, “oh you’re Korean? Okay cool.” Because you’re like at some point in your life you've had some experiences similar to mine, you know?

First Bobbi is admitting that not only doesn't she feel white, but that she doesn't feel comfortable around a group of all white people. She's more likely to feel comfortable in a group of all people of color, even if they don't share her background. She is confused by this and questions her feelings. Linda takes an educative role in that moment and explains to Bobbi that because she has experienced oppression (something we already know from Bobbi's stories) it makes sense that she is going to be leery of white people who might enact white supremacy. It's understandable that she would feel more comfortable with people of color who would be more likely to share experiences of oppression.

Bobbi listened to Linda's response and continued with her concerns, opening up a dialogue with other members of the group.

Bobbi: But I feel like I just don't like to talk to them [white people]. I just don't want to be in their company, you know? Like not to be, I just feel like, I just feel like there's something very aggressive and selfish with them.

Tina: But at the same time you feel guilty for being half white?

Bobbi: And I feel, I don't know I just don't feel aggressive and selfish. (Lots of laughter by everybody.) So I'm like, "why am I viewing a group of people in that way?" You know? Like Somali people, I've met aggressive and selfish Somali people, you know? But I just, I really just don't feel like I'm like that. So I just don't know what's wrong with all of them. But then I feel like, you know that's fucked up because I'm thinking of them as all one thing, and that's stupid, you know? I was racist.

Linda: No you're prejudiced. You don't have to have power to be racist.

Alana: Actually I do feel aggressive and selfish, like I feel like I take up a lot of space in spaces of color. This is something that I'm working on, like for the first time here [living in the Bay Area]. I don't think I'm experiencing... it's just weird I don't want to say anything like white guilt because I think it's very different, but I've experienced a lot of class guilt for the first time here I think. And it's really since I've been immersed in spaces with predominantly people of color for the first time in my entire life. And it's like all these ways that like, sort of like this other sense of entitlement that's in my culture. Always different things that like, I

was talking with Silvia earlier, the first house I lived in with all women of color, they were all first and second generation immigrant families from all over the world. And I grew up as an only child with my white mom, and I'm a spoiled brat; I'm used to getting my way all the time. It was really intense to be confronted day after day after day after day of the ways that my privilege, because I was acculturated in whiteness, how that played out in like the way that I live, and the way that I interact in the world, and how I take up a lot of space, how I'm demanding, all these things. So this is like something that I attribute only to whiteness. All those bad qualities that I have, they are specifically white to me.

Bobbi: Are we right to attribute that to whiteness?

Alana: I mean like yeah, I think, because I don't notice those things come up for me when I'm around other white people. It's exactly, it's totally normalized to like, to take up space, to speak when not spoken to, to live life in a certain way.

In the dialogue above the group begins to describe what cultural whiteness entails.

Bobbi describes white people as “aggressive and selfish.” Immediately Tina challenges Bobbi asking if she feels guilty for being half white. Throughout Tina’s interviews, her stories about herself and her identity carry resonances of white guilt; so her question can be interpreted to be as much about Tina’s feelings about herself as it might be about Bobbi. Bobbi, in response, doesn’t claim guilt, but rather, once again distances herself from whiteness claiming that she doesn’t possess those white characteristics of aggressiveness and selfishness. However, then she wonders out loud if it is racist of her to label those characteristics as “white.”

Linda, once again taking an educative role, informs Bobbi that her comment is not racist. It’s prejudiced. Linda’s view comes from a theory of diversity and social justice in which racism is defined as “racial prejudice plus power.” Definitions from the book, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* can help further elaborate on Linda’s point. Prejudice is, “a set of negative personal beliefs about a social group that leads individuals to prejudge people from that group or the group in general, regardless of individual

differences among members of that group” (Goodman & Shapiro, 1997, p. 118). Thus one can see how Bobbi’s comment is a prejudiced comment. Social power is defined as, “Access to resources that enhance one’s chances of getting what one needs or influencing others in order to lead a safe, productive, fulfilling life” (Griffin, 1997, p. 73). In the book there is an elaborate explanation of how oppression operates; social group membership (for example membership to the white race), because of historical inequalities, creates differing access to social power and privilege depending on whether or not your membership is that of a target group or an agent group. Putting racial prejudice and power together, racism is defined as, “The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the United States (Blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asians), by members of the agent racial group who have relatively more social power (Whites)” (Wijeysinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997, p. 88). Within that theoretical framework, only white people can be racist. Negative comments made by people against white people and other people of color are considered prejudiced but not racist. Linda was naming that distinction.

Steering the discussion away from a more abstract discussion of racism and prejudice, Alana personalizes Bobbi’s claim in relation to her own life and admits that she does feel, “aggressive and selfish.” In fact, through the use of the phrase “when I am around *other* white people (emphasis mine)” she positions herself in relation to white people, rather than in opposition to white people. Alana then adds to the growing definition of cultural whiteness remarking that she “takes up a lot of space” and is “demanding.” All those qualities she specifically attributes to whiteness. Bobbi, still unsure, again asks if it is right to attribute such characteristics to whiteness. Alana

responds that she thinks the characteristics are white; her proof is that those qualities are normalized with white people, but not among people of color. As the interview progresses, there is a continually unfolding definition of cultural whiteness and continued discussions about relationships to whiteness.

A little further on in the group interview Bobbi told a story describing white people as people who “don’t ever want to learn anything new.” Later in the interview, when the conversation again turned to the topic of whiteness, Linda revealed that she and her friends “talk shit about white people” in front of Linda’s white girlfriend. Linda admitted that such comments are difficult for her girlfriend (and consequently her, because she cares about her girlfriends’ feelings), yet she doesn’t feel her girlfriend should take them personally because she and her friends are referring to racism as an institution. She said, “This is institutional, and this is you, and unless you are doing that fucked up shit, I’m not talking about you.” From there, the conversation developed into the dialogue at the opening to this chapter in which Bobbi is talking about her mom and xenophobia. As participants talked about their struggles with reconciling whiteness, Marta chimed in and said, “I think that for me it’s different. I’m pretty proud of both sides. I’m not embarrassed by my white Jewish side.” Bobbi admitted that’s how she feels she should be, proud of her white side.

At that point in the conversation, I spoke up reflecting on their statements and adding my opinion. First, I recognized that everyone in the group up to that point had talked about wanting to have distance from, or even having hatred or disdain for whiteness. I admitted that there is a part of me that also wants to be distanced from whiteness which is related to also wanting to be accepted by people of color, and part of



relating to people of color is disdaining whiteness. There were lots of head nods and uh-hmms in response to my statement. Marta, was the first to speak, stating, “but I think I feel dishonest if I am like that. I feel like I have to deny my whiteness that way when I’m with people of color.” Linda confirmed her thought stating, “You do.” Marta continued, “I hate American culture as much as the next person, but I’m also not willing to write off every person who is white.” She then shared that one of her best friends is white and “she’s never said anything offensive.” Bobbi added another perspective and said, “except for my mom, every family member on my white side is racist.” Alana then stated that she has a lot of anger because she has been hurt by many white people. She said, “I have had a very conflicted relationship with white people always.” For instance she loves her mom, but her mom has also hurt her. In addition she has had white friends who have hurt her deeply but also white friends who have been very supportive in a time when she most needed support. Alana then elaborated that it isn’t so easy for mixed people to just choose to embrace their white cultural side because there is “the issue of power and the issue of imperialism and colonialism which is dominated by white folk.” It’s just not “so simple,” Alana explained.

Alana makes an important point. There is something distinct about being a person mixed both white and of color. We, and our families, are often victims of racism yet we’re expected to embrace cultural whiteness which entails a history of colonialism and imperialism. It is like embracing your torturers. Yet, as Marta explains above, it is implausible to write off white people, not only because we have white family and friends, but also because we are part white and to do so would be dishonest. Still, embracing white culture is difficult because, as Alana asked, “What is white culture?”

## **Cultural Whiteness and Our Lives: Like Having a Relative Who's a Crackhead that You Love Anyway**

Cultural whiteness unfolded in the Oakland interview as: selfishness, aggressive behavior, taking up a lot of space, being demanding, being racist, and supporting white supremacy. Cultural whiteness was a topic raised throughout the Boston group interview as well, only it was discussed in a much less personal manner. It was discussed more abstractly. Diana introduced the topic of white culture early on in the interview opening a dialogue about white privilege and white supremacy. She said, "I don't think that most white people get it, but the country is browning...They don't know that there is a way to be white. They just think it's the normal way and everybody else is different." Joanna then speculated as to why white people may not understand that the country is browning, wondering if it is because, "A lot of people live in all-white neighborhoods in small towns." Joanna felt that, "white people in the city, they are fully aware of the constant changing of the culture, that the America is browning. But the majority of white people, as far as I understand it, are not in the metropolitan areas." Then Mindy raised the issue of how the media portrays the issue posing a question at the end that Diana answered.

They said:

Mindy: But is that even reflected in our culture? Because every time the subject comes up, like I know Time<sup>13</sup> did the thing about the browning of America and they had a picture of a woman who looked really kind of white. And it was like, this is the face of the new America? And it's like, well she looks pretty mixed, it's not, it's a less threatening sort of way that they're spinning the whole browning of America. And then you have to think, what is so threatening about someone who's darker and someone who's not white?

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<sup>13</sup> In 1993, Time Magazine ran a special issue. The cover portrayed the picture of a fair-skinned woman, light-eyed woman who was digitally created. Next to her face was the caption, "Take a good look at this woman. She was created by a computer from a mix of several races. What you see is a remarkable preview of..." Below the caption is the title "The New Face of America: How Immigrants are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society." The picture of the cover can be viewed at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html>

Diana: White supremacy is at stake

Mindy: Exactly.

As in the Oakland group, these women argue that white people are invested in white supremacy. During the Oakland group interview, in response to Bobbi's speculation as to why white people might fear people of color, Alana argued that white culture is a racist culture connected to white supremacy. There is a similar argument above from the Boston group interview, leading to the conclusion: "white supremacy is at stake."

Later in the interview, Joanna referenced more popular media bringing up the cable television show *Black.White*, which she said was "poorly done" but "interesting." The show highlighted two families, a white family and a black family, the members of which wore make-up in order to "switch" races. They then talked about their experiences "living" as a different race. Joanna admitted that she only saw the highlight but Mindy had viewed the show and gave her analysis. She said,

And I think the problem with that is that they never address white privilege. They never talk about the history of racism. It's just like oh it's just a matter of perspective we'll just have people put on face paint. And you know everyone's prejudiced. And that's not the history of the country. It's like since the 1600 there was this whole idea of white is best, and everyone else is Other.

In the statement above, Mindy is expressing frustration because prejudice is portrayed in the show without acknowledgment of the historical context of white supremacy. Joanna added further analysis to Mindy's statement, saying, "Everyone is prejudiced but one group has always had the power." These comments echoed the Oakland group exchange in which Linda argued for the importance of recognizing power differences between whites and people of color and named the distinction between prejudice and racism.

Mindy continued her point stating that it is frustrating that “American culture” looks at “individuals” rather than “culture as a collective.” She stated, “they never say, ‘oh let's look at how whites, or white ethnics have continually advanced.’” In response, Diana asked, “History books don’t say that, do they?” Ruth replied, “History books don't tell any truths at all.” At that point I spoke up and said, “It is getting better. There are books like *A People’s History of the United States*.” In the book, the author, Howard Zinn, recounts history from multiple perspectives, including history from the perspectives of American-Indians, black people, women, and poor people. During individual interviews at people’s homes, I had noticed that several of my participants had the book on their bookshelves, including Ruth. Ruth argued, “Yeah, but that’s not required reading in school.”

As the women in both group interviews talked, a collective vision of whiteness unfolded. The participants’ words demonstrate anger towards white people, as a group, highlighting how “they” (whites) act in racist ways and protect white supremacy. However, there was also an acknowledgement that racism and white supremacy is situated in a cultural context in which the media and history books shade the truth about oppression against people of color. Thus the conversation about whiteness flowed from a focus on the actions of individuals to that of white people as a collective to an acknowledgement of media and cultural influence.

There were a few more telling comments in the group interviews about cultural whiteness. At the end of the Boston interview, Katherine, who was one of the quieter group participants said,

One of the things that I said in my individual interviews and I wonder if other people feel this, is that for me in thinking about whiteness., I guess actually

through the process of interviews and reflecting on it, I see that one way I think about it is having the freedom not to think about this at all.

Katherine then made reference to her liberal white ex-boyfriend. Both she and he spent time doing work in different parts of Asia. He was always praised for his work and he had the option to “choose” who he wanted to work with and was always rewarded for his work and it never called into question his identity. Katherine, who is not part Asian, had to face challenges to her choices. In her individual interview, Katherine explained how, for example, she was turned down for a job to teach English in Taiwan because, “It’s not really about teaching. A lot of it is for show. They really care to have a white-faced, blue-eyed person teaching them English.” She had to send a picture with her application. There were a “gazillion jobs” Katherine said, and none would hire her even though she had experience teaching English as a second language. She was surprised by the blatant discrimination; “they didn’t try to hide it.” Katherine said that it is warm in Taiwan and consequently she was tan and darker than she was while in Japan. In Taiwan she got questioned a lot more often about her American identity and was not hired for jobs. Katherine said, “I say it’s because my skin is darker, but I don’t know if that’s the reason.” In addition, her identity and her alliances were at times called into question because of the choices she made to work with a cultural group that was not her own. Katherine’s comment came on the heels of a comment by Mindy about the difficulty of reconciling her identity and her relationship to whiteness. Katherine was not “white enough” to be hired in some cases and she was simultaneously challenged for not choosing to work with African-Americans.

I responded to Katherine’s comment about white people having the freedom to not think about their whiteness by sharing how I struggled with accepting a prestigious

assistantship working with a Carnegie initiative, an assistantship that I knew meant I would be working predominately with white people within academia when I longed to do more community based work with people of color, as I had before returning to graduate school. I had applied for the assistantship and had to be chosen by both fellow classmates and staff for the position. After applying, I went away for a week and upon return found out I was chosen for the job. I shared with the group,

And that was really hard. I think any white person would've been like of course I want this assistantship, it's prestigious, it pays, all the stuff. But for me it was making a choice to not work with my community. And I think of my community predominantly as other Latinos and Latinas but also people of color.

In response another participant, Joanna, shared her sense of isolation within her predominately white graduate program of trying to combine her career as an engineer with her personal interests of teaching children of color about engineering and serving as a role model. The white people around her did not have those kinds of goals. So, other aspects to add to the list of cultural whiteness are the freedom to not think about what it means to be white and the liberty to not feel torn between succeeding in predominately white spaces and supporting people of color.

In the very last few minutes of the Oakland interview, Bobbi summed up the complexity of having a disdain for cultural whiteness while negotiating having white people in your family. She said, "It's like having a relative who's a crackhead that you love anyway." There were a lot of mm-hmms in response from the group. Then Bobbi added, "It's like, what are you going to do?" In her mind, there was no choice but to accept and love even that which brings pain and heartache.

Although one could surmise from these stories a myriad of reasons why we might not want to be considered to be white, as the facilitator, in the Boston group interview, I

asked pointedly, “What makes it really important to not be identified as white?” Joanna responded first saying, “Fear of being seen as a sellout. That’s part of it.” Ruth added,

I think fear of being categorized in a group of people that I have a lot of opinions about, you know as far as, as far as what whiteness is, just whiteness. But I don’t ever get mistaken for white.

Ruth is naming explicitly that it is hard to acknowledge a connection to something about which you have negative opinions. Ruth who “looks black” would never get mistaken for white, but her white mom worked in the predominately black K-8 school she attended, so those around her knew she had white heritage.

Katherine shared that she once was asked by a black woman, who didn’t understand why someone would not pass as white if they could, “What is there to be gained by clearing misconceptions about who you are?” Katherine admitted that she “had a hard time answering her question.” Others in the group wondered if the woman who asked was older (she wasn’t much older than Katherine, who is 27), and Joanna, who is 23, argued that even though racism continues today, passing never feels like a matter of survival, as it might have in the past. She said,

I feel perfectly comfortable to go through this world as a person of color. ... I think that part of it too is because I know that I’m not white, even if I could pass for white in my skin tone, my parents, my mother and her race and her family, have had an effect that- that’s now my life, and the attachment that I feel to black culture, and the way that I feel when I see images of black culture on TV, and that’s a part of who I am and my identity, and what I care about the world. Even if no one knew that I was attached to my culture because it’s part of my heritage, it’s still a part of who I am.

Joanna acknowledged that she has the privilege to claim an identity as a person of color without fear of harm. Joanna argues that this privilege comes from the fact that racism is not as life threatening as it used to be. Although this may be true, there are a myriad of other factors – her class privilege, her lighter skin tone, her residence in diverse cities,

etc. – that may contribute to her “comfort” in “going through the world as a person of color.” However, it is important to acknowledge that for Joanna, to claim to be white felt like denying her mom’s culture which meant denying a part of her identity and a culture to which she feels attached. Diana validated Joanna’s sentiment, exclaiming, “That’s exactly why I don’t want to be white. Because I’m at home in my ethnic culture.”

Diana’s experiences, as 56 year old woman raised in a predominantly black community were distinct from Joanna’s as a 23 year old woman raised in a black and white racially mixed community. However, both of them emphasize the importance of their attachment to their black culture.

### **The Pervasiveness of Cultural Whiteness**

Discussions about whiteness were not limited to the group interviews. They permeated the individual interviews as well. Whiteness relates to every major theme discussed thus far: identity formation, insider/outsider status, fluidity and ambiguity, and passing. Yet whiteness was such a prominent topic of discussion in the interviews that it warrants its own space. The women often had sophisticated analyses of whiteness as a broader cultural concept as well as more personalized stories about how whiteness related to their lives.

Whiteness was approached in distinct ways by different participants. These approaches are impacted by such things as degrees of passing, the dating of white people versus people of color, academic involvement in issues of race, and political ideologies. Alana, a master’s student in Education during the time of the interviews, often provided sophisticated analyses of white supremacy, colonialism, and whiteness as a cultural



concept. During a discussion about dating, Alana discussed issues that came up for her when she dated white people. To explain her reactions she said,

That's just the historical reality that we live in; whiteness can't be separated from white supremacy and how white people benefit from racism. It's different. They're completely different things. Dating white people is really different than dating a person of color regardless of what their racial background is, you know?

For Alana, understandings of interactions with white people always included an acknowledgement of power differentials between white people and people of color.

Because Alana used the term cultural whiteness in both her individual interviews and the group interview, in her second individual interview I asked her specifically, “What is cultural whiteness?” She provided a more expansive, yet overlapping, definition to those collectively created in the group interviews. She said,

What is cultural whiteness? That's a big question because what is culture? It's hard to talk about it because white people are invisible, the culture is invisible, the mainstream, sort of dominant culture. Definitely, I would say it varies from place to place, and from region to region. Where I grew up I definitely think that there is something about everything from theaters to music aesthetics to literary access, to knowledge, cultural capital, and language – white references – I don't want to say popular culture references but activities of leisure time and what you do in your spare time. I know part of that is class but class and race are so mixed. Also family, like being in more isolated communities I think is very white, not being around as much extended family. Language, standard English, you know, having access to that. A lot of it is just naming unnamed things, like ways of being, mannerisms, behaviors, knowing how to react, knowing how to decode behavior and know what someone's trying to say or not trying to say. And being able to not feel intimidated by certain authority positions, whether it be teachers, police officers, counselors, you know? Does that sort of answer your question?

In this definition, Alana touches upon some of the main points made in the group interviews, for instance that white culture is dominant and invisible. Whereas several of the comments about cultural whiteness in the group interviews focused on individual characteristics of white people enacting white culture, Alana talked about cultural

whiteness in terms of access and an implicit knowing of mainstream culture that permeates all aspects of culture including music, knowledge, language, and leisure time activities. In her last sentence she implies that cultural whiteness carries a sense of certainty or self-assuredness with cultural authority figures.

I mentioned to her that she had talked earlier about cultural whiteness in terms of relationship to space and I asked her to elaborate on that. She responded,

Yeah, I definitely think that that's embedded within the culture. Even if you think about it going back historically, how white people take land, and this idea of land tenure which was introduced to indigenous folks who didn't have that. Needing all this space and this land, and these resources, they [white people] were like, "well you're not using it so we are going to buy it, we are going to take it from you." I think that really is embedded within the history of that. And the types of things that white folks like to do in their spare time, which is very much about leisure and leisure being very much attached to citizenship in this country, being able to purchase that leisure for things like outdoor activities like skiing and golfing. Golf, I hate golf. Golf courses are just so wasteful. ... So even just thinking about, taking up a lot of physical space just with all the different things that need land, whatever. But also there's no space for the voice of the other. There is dominating of the knowledge base, you know? Like this semester in one of my classes we talked about codified cultural schemas. We talked about the scientific method as being a culturally codified schema. I thought that was so cool. Just like thinking about the way that science is culturally codified. Just like this absolute truth and absolute knowledge that goes uncontested. It's completely culturally situated, all the different ways of acquiring scientific knowledge... So thinking about the Enlightenment and how western modernity dominates everyone's ways of thinking and rationalizing, normalizing. All that stuff takes up a lot of space. So I think that definitely impacts the way that white people feel entitled to that space. And they feel entitled without earning it in any sort of way, you know? It's this unearned sense of entitlement just by virtue of being white. And that is embedded within the culture whatever cultural whiteness looks like. So I think that that's part of it, the ways that I have been acculturated. I definitely know that I have participated in that and it comes out.

Here, Alana provided a sophisticated definition of cultural whiteness focusing on the ways in which it is embedded in the historical and cultural ways that white people think and take up space. Cultural whiteness entails a historical legacy of colonialism with an uncontested concept that land can be owned, bought, and taken. Cultural whiteness is

also made visible through an examination of dominant ways of thinking which relate to the concept of “rational thinking” and “absolute truth.” Finally cultural whiteness is marked by unearned entitlement – to land, to space, to knowledge, to people.

The majority of the participants have a politicized, social justice oriented critical consciousness. As such, identity formation and negotiations often involve a critique of personal behaviors and the behaviors of others in relation to conceptions of cultural whiteness. For example, Alana, at several points in her interviews, critically examines her actions in relation to whiteness. She acknowledges that she possesses cultural whiteness and at times acts in culturally white ways. Alana, as an adult, has chosen to immerse herself in communities of color. This is because as someone who has experienced a fair amount of racism, she feels “safer” in groups with people of color than white groups. However, she also appreciates the ways in which people of color challenge her to examine her privilege.

### **Examining White Privilege**

As has been discussed in this and previous chapters, several women named and examined white privilege in relation to their lives. Bobbi, Alana, Ruth, and Joanna have had prominent voices in this chapter thus far. Tina and Mindy, as two women who almost always are identified by others as white, both acknowledged their white privilege. Tina, for example, talked about how she would not get in trouble for inadvertently breaking things at work while her co-workers of color would. Mindy and Elizabeth both talked about how in their Filipino culture, whiteness is revered. Katherine stated specifically that one of the benefits of being mixed is “white skin privilege.” Similar to Katherine, in a discussion about why she feels called to be an ally to people who have

darker skin, Marta said, “I have white skin privilege.” Diana spoke about the differences in how she was treated when she dyed her hair blond and people assumed she was white as opposed to when people did not make that assumption. As a blond, white-perceived woman, she was treated with much more respect and friendliness by white people. Susan shared how her mom always “tried to make [her] look more white.” In her individual interviews, she discussed the privilege of having her white mom put her in school; her mom became her representative.

Whiteness was not discussed as much in the Albuquerque group interview or among the Albuquerque based participants. Maria, for example, talked more about racism than whiteness in relation to her life. She did say that her “biggest challenges” have come from her family in that both her mom and dad at times challenged or questioned her Chicana identity claim. Maria also acknowledged that the only other “brown” person in her graduate program, who was Native, was also light-skinned. She and her light-skinned Native classmate would have conversations about what it meant to “technically” be the brown people. Maria felt that the school had certain expectations of how she would act, perhaps white like them; her response was to bring up racism consistently and never “let anyone off the hook.” I too have noticed that in graduate school many of the people of color are light-skinned and/or mixed. I recognize that there is a very complicated relationship to racism and white privilege playing out in my ability to be in graduate school and the fact that many other people of color are not represented.

Brittney, took a less critical approach, stating that “race never really came up” for her. She emphasized her ability to get along with anybody and her desire to be friends with anybody regardless of race. Ana similarly said, “I feel like I’ve always been able to

hold my own in all the spaces I go to.” Brittney speculated, “New Mexico is really like mixed up, I think, anyway so it’s not as common here to hear racist things as much.” Ana added that instead for her, “negotiations were more about being a girl, or being gay, or something like that.” Yet, Ana did say that “one of the greatest challenges is being asked to be a token sometimes.” She then shared the story of working in an organization that claimed to want to hire people of color but at some point it occurred to her, “that they were looking for somebody who has a particular skin color but thinks the same way as everybody else in the organization.” Ana realized that she was, “treated like any other white employee.” Similar to Maria’s experience in graduate school, she had the privilege of fitting in enough to be hired but then dealt with the racism of being tokenized. Jessica was the one participant in the study who did not participate in a group interview. In her individual interviews she talked about her complicated relationship to whiteness as a brown-skinned person raised in a white community. So discussions of whiteness and white privilege were present among the Albuquerque group but there were no explicit discussions about what constitutes cultural whiteness and white supremacy as there were among the participants in the other two cities.

Linda stands out among the participants because of the quantity of time she spent discussing whiteness in relation to her life. Recall that Linda lives in Oakland, her mom is Filipino, and her biological dad is white but was minimally present in her life. She was raised by her mom and black step-father and attended racially diverse schools in the Bay Area. Linda and I had numerous conversations about whiteness in both of her individual interviews. Linda is sometimes perceived to be white, but not always. She works in the Bay Area for a non-profit organization that promotes the rights of people of color; the

entire staff is comprised of people of color. The interview exchanges I had with Linda about whiteness were often very dialogical; I shared several stories and thoughts of my own in response to Linda's narrative. Many of these discussions came about as Linda processed her positionality in relationship to friends, who are mostly women of color, and her partner, Tracy, who is white. She also talked about the balancing act of negotiating those relationships, especially when her friends and her partner came together in the same space, in light of the politics of whiteness and racism. For several years I had a white partner and experienced many of the same challenges Linda described in integrating my partner with my friends of color. Linda is a friend of one of my closest friends, and I felt an instant rapport with her. This led to deep discussions about painful and challenging issues related to whiteness.

Discussions about whiteness with Linda began early in the first individual interview. Linda began by discussing how she often positions herself as an outsider even in communities of color because she is usually "the lightest person" and doesn't always feel like she fits in. She then said, "It's interesting actually, that whole whiteness part has come up a lot in conversations with my partner." Her partner is "not very politically educated," and Tracy's dad is "inflammatory" and "antagonistic." Linda says that she "loves" Tracy's dad and that he reminds her of her (black step) dad in many ways because her dad can be similarly antagonistic. Tracy's dad, however, says "racist shit" and simultaneously challenges her to embrace her whiteness. He once said to her, "You're half white. Why don't you embrace your whiteness? Next time I see you I want you to know some Polish dances, and know some Polish food and know some Polish culture." Linda replied to him that she doesn't have access to that (because she doesn't

have a relationship with her white dad or his family). But she admitted that the dialogues with Tracy's dad were "really kind of intense."

Later in the interview she said that her internal reaction to Tracy's dad's challenge was, "Well white people are fucked up. That's why I'm not proud of being white." She then added, "My recent history is Japanese-American, in Hawaii. I'm like, yeah, they did experience oppression. They were interned, and there was a lot of racism after the war."

I asked Linda to expand upon what she meant when she said, "white people are fucked up." She said,

The history of America, I mean really it comes back to America and being American. I am, ironically, just getting over the lie of freedom for all and justice, and all that crap. Really, I did internalize that. I did want to believe that there is justice, and that America is great. And my perspective- and just to keep it real I know that in other countries they don't get to experience the same kind of freedoms that we do. But we don't live in a just society. And I'm just coming to terms with how fucked up America is, not just to our own people, but to everyone in the whole fucking world, you know? That's kind of hard. It's been really hard, removing the blinders and being really depressed at the injustice everywhere and most of it was perpetrated by white men. Men are in power all over the world. And there is so much injustice, so I don't want to align myself with that. But I think that's why I've never really been [aligned]. It's been easy too, not having my dad be a part of my life. Having my dad be an asshole makes it easier to not be nice to white people, you know?

Linda, in her explanation above, described a cultural history of white and male supremacy. Her knowledge about the institutional injustices perpetuated by white men, along with her personal negative experiences and lack of contact with her white father, make it easy for her to disdain whiteness and wish to disassociate from that. However, I wondered then why she chose a white partner so I said, "but your partner is white."

During the interviews Linda described Tracy as almost perfect. Linda shared,

Actually, when I first started dating her, what I would say to all my friends is, "she's perfect in every way except 1) she's white, and 2) she's not politically educated." And you know, I think that part of that fear was because I haven't felt

like this before about someone, so the fear of falling in love. I'm falling so quickly, and so hard.

Linda acknowledged that she loved Tracy but had a hard time reconciling Tracy's lack of understanding about the dynamics of racism and racial politics. However, Linda also shared that most of her partners have been white, and said, "I think that's another issue around power." She admitted that with a white partner she did not have to deal with the challenge of being less politically educated and would never feel like she was "oppressing somebody" as she might with a partner of color.

Linda has other challenges in this relationship. A major challenge is dealing with Tracy's discomfort around Linda's friends. Tracy feels uncomfortable around Linda's friends because her friends make negative comments about "white people." In addition, Linda had to negotiate straddling her desire to be with women of color friends in women of color spaces and her desire to be with her girlfriend. She shared her story of going to a gay pride event where there were "a lot of people of color" and her girlfriend later told her she felt "really out of place." Although Tracy never named race as the issue, Linda realized that her friends did not really include Tracy and added,

And she's the one white girl, with five people of color. It is really hard to negotiate, because I think I don't do- that's probably where I should be translating, but I don't. That's where I should be like trying to include her, by being more of a bridge, but I'm not. Because I am, like, people of color aligned ... These [friends] are people I've known for a long time, and that's how we are when we're together, you know? We talk smack about white people, and our conversations are racialized. And I want to be sensitive to my girlfriend's feeling of alienation. And it's really hard because like you said, when she says something like, when she said, "I feel like you're generalizing about all white people," I'm like, "well I am. I sure am. I'm generalizing about all white people, but that doesn't mean it's you." It's really hard, because I'm not sensitive in that way. I'm not sensitive to stand up for her when my friend was like oh, "your people..." And Tracy was like, "I didn't do that." But like, I'm not good at being her champion really. That's what I feel like I need to be, and I haven't been. I feel bad about it, like I



need to go make amends with my girlfriend. I mean it definitely highlights that it has to be really hard for her.

Linda feels torn between being supportive of her girlfriend and wanting to allow her friends to have the space to speak their mind as women of color who have experienced racism in a white supremacist society.

As a facilitator, I then tried to focus the discussion on Linda and said, “You talk about the difficulty for Tracy, but there are also difficulties for you, being in the middle.” She responded candidly,

Well also, then to be white. Because that's always the part that's not said. That's always the part that's not talked about. And it's funny because it came up more recently where I was really conscious about that, because these dialogues are happening with Tracy. Because, like I said, this is really the first time I'm being challenged with someone being like, “well why aren't you praising your white side?”

Linda argued that we don't talk about our own whiteness as mixed people. In looking at the interviews there is relatively little discussion by most people about their whiteness. Whiteness is more often discussed in relation to white family members or cultural whiteness in general.

Linda then shared a story of how she was hurt by a comment someone made about whiteness. She said,

So, a friend of mine in passing, I don't even remember who it was, said something like “oh yeah, I found out recently that I have white in my family and I'm just really upset about it.” And they said this to me, you know?

Linda said that she was “floored” by the statement but didn't say anything in response to her friend. Yet Linda understood the friend's desire to not want to admit white heritage. She added,

But then also I've been villainized by my own white heritage too, like I'm down on the white man for sure. That's not me and that's not my family. Maybe that's not my dad, maybe it is. I'm working that out too.

Linda's biological white dad was a weekend dad when she was younger and then, beginning when Linda was in college, they were estranged for 10 years up until her father passed away. Linda said this disconnection from her father made it easier to, "put [her] whiteness somewhere outside of" herself. Linda said, "How do we notice our whiteness I think is the biggest challenge."

All of the discussions above happened in the first interview with Linda. After our first interview, Linda brought up some of our discussions with Tracy. This sparked more discussions and brought to the surface more conflict. Linda was on the verge of moving in with Tracy at the time of the interviews and admitted that she was "scared" and "freaking out" but added that she has "serious love" for Tracy. Nonetheless, the impending move made the conflict with Tracy feel extremely threatening for both of them.

At the beginning of the conversation Tracy said to Linda, "whenever you talk about white people, it's really negatively." Linda responded by admitting that she does "white bash" with her friends and needs to be more sensitive about how it will affect Tracy. She recalled that she said to Tracy,

But I tried really hard to be really clear with you, and really like break down the difference between this and you and your relationship to that, and saying that you can only take responsibility for white people as a whole when you've done the oppressing, when you're the one who's being unconscious, when you're the one acting like that. That's when you take ownership of it, but you don't need to own all of that shit.

Linda tried to get Tracy to understand that there is a difference between oppression as a larger concept and her individual responsibility in that. However, in doing so Linda also

appeared to be trying to convince herself of the same because she added, “I don't need to own all of that shit, you know? And yet, maybe I do because that's why I don't want to identify as white, you know?” Linda shared that she has been asking herself,

Why is it that I really just want to identify as a person of color, a woman of color? Like, where is my white identity? And I've superficially said, oh yes I acknowledge I have skin privilege, and not superficially, but that's what I say to myself. I know that I have skin privilege; I know that I'm white.

Linda said that those conversations where she asks herself those hard questions have been “peripheral” conversations that come up with “other mixed people who are mixed with white.” With one of her mixed friends she has been able to have deep conversations about not feeling like she belongs in people of color space, the difficulties of being seen as white, and recognizing the experiential differences for people of color who don't have skin privilege.

Linda and her partner resolved their conflict. Linda agreed to be more sensitive to Tracy's needs. In Linda's words, Tracy admitted, “I realize that I'm having a hard time separating out institutional racism and my personal involvement on the individual level, and all that, breaking that apart.” When Linda said, “What are we going to do?” Tracy replied, “I was thinking that I could get some books.”<sup>14</sup> Linda shared with Tracy that she too has been challenged by her friends of color and promised to continue to help Tracy to further her understanding of racism just as friends have done for her.

At the end of the interview Linda said, “This whiteness thing is huge. It's really huge.” Linda then again brought up the story of her friend who found out she had white heritage, sparking a dialogue between us:

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<sup>14</sup> Linda suggested the book *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel and the article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh

Linda: Yeah, yeah. It is really hard though. It is really hard. Why didn't I say something to my friend who was like I just found out that I have white in me and I'm just really upset, you know?

Me: I think it's too risky. I think for me that the fear is that they are going to start seeing me as white.

Linda: Right. Mm-hmm, because you are.

Me: Right. No, don't say that. No I'm not. That's what I want to say, you know what I mean?

Linda: Totally. Totally. It's interesting because that's coming up with these conversations with Tracy because early on when she was like, "it's just really upsetting and blah, blah, blah." And she was like, "you wish that you weren't white." And I was like, "but I am white. And whenever I give you a hard time, you know you can say, 'well you're white too.'"

Me: Oh, I would never give anybody the opportunity to say that to me.

Linda: But it's *true*. But it *is* true.

Me: Right.

Linda: And that's part of what I really am trying to work on, what I need to work on that's coming up in these fucking interviews, that's coming up like her dad is saying "claim your whiteness, be proud of being white, you know?" It's interesting too because I feel I can, this last year I have been able to say- we've made comments about my half whiteness. We've made comments about the racial stuff. It's coming up. It's on the forefront of my mind. Yeah, and it is hard. Because you know what, we're dealing with all the same stuff that Tracy is trying to work out right now. Does that mean that I'm bad? Does that mean that I can't be a person of color anymore? Does that mean that my experience as a person of color is not authentic because I am white also? What is the experience of a person of color? It's how I define it because really ... they see me as an exotic other, an Asian too, the model minority. Come on, seriously there's not a lot of discrimination. No one is calling me a freakin' banana or twinkie or whatever. Just putting myself in the framework of thinking that I'm white in this every day racialized context, within that framework.

Me: I haven't heard the term "twinkie" used before.

Linda: Well, a twinkie means that you are yellow on the outside and white on the inside. What that means for me is something totally different because I am a twinkie. (whispering) I am a white person. I'm more like the sunshine cookie, those lemon cookies, the white cookie with the lemon inside. So whatever is a

person of color is what I define, it's what I have to define, that's my privilege, because I'm a person with fairly fair skin who could pass as white maybe. That's the funny thing about queerness too, because people who aren't queer aren't seeing you as queer. Or people who are white don't see you as a person of color. Asian people are totally like, "oh I see the Asian in you." But white people are just like whatever. Straight people are like, "whatever I don't see it." It's not as obvious. So I get to choose. I get to choose if I want to identify as a person of color. That is my privilege.

In this exchange, Linda names our connections to whiteness that as mixed people we often don't want to name: the privilege of choosing, the fear of being called white, the ways we have to own our connection to whiteness and all the questions that arise:

Does that mean that I'm bad? Does that mean that I can't be a person of color anymore? Does that mean that my experience as a person of color is not authentic because I am white also? What is the experience of a person of color?

It is the same fear and defensiveness that Tracy experienced, only it is exacerbated by a fear of being disconnected and/or outcasted by people of our own cultural backgrounds, by people of color, a group which, to some extent, we belong. It is no accident that Linda's voice fell to a whisper when she said, "I am white." It feels like that which must not be named, it is our Voldemort<sup>15</sup>. Linda challenged me on this when I resisted her saying to me, "but you are white." I carry at least as much white skin privilege as Linda. I am part white, as is Linda. It feels much easier to admit "part" whiteness or "half" whiteness than just whiteness. We want to say that it is because we don't want to deny our wholeness or our families of color. This may be true, but the resistance comes from a deeper place than that, evidenced by the fact that we don't wince or whisper when we claim to be people of color or Latina, Asian, Black, etc. without simultaneously naming our whiteness. Perhaps Linda named it perfectly with the question, "Does that mean I'm

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<sup>15</sup> Voldemort is a fictional character in the Harry Potter book series written by J.K. Rowling. He is a dark wizard that is so feared that most characters refuse to say his name and refer to him as "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

bad.” As (at least partial) insiders to people of color spaces, many of us hear frequently all the negative terms associated with whiteness. We know that to claim whiteness carries with it a responsibility to examine our complicity in the negative aspects of cultural whiteness.

## **Conclusion**

These women’s stories, both personal and analytical, add to and expand upon whiteness theory. Definitions of cultural whiteness unfolded as the women spoke about their views and their experiences. There was a simultaneous connection to and separation from cultural whiteness as well as a complex relationship to white privilege.

### *Cultural Whiteness for Mixed Race Women as it Relates to the Culture of Power*

The women collectively define cultural whiteness. In *Other People’s Children* Lisa Delpit defines what she calls “the culture of power.” Delpit, a teacher educator, writes specifically about issues of power within the classroom, however, several of her points about what the “culture of power” entails relate to the participants’ definitions of “cultural whiteness.” Delpit defines five aspects of power. We can examine the participants’ words and experiences in relation to Delpit’s five aspects of power.

First, Delpit (1995) argues that “Issues of power are enacted in classrooms” including that teachers hold power over students, and publishers hold power over curriculum (p. 24). Even though all the participants were all asked to talk about their experiences in schools, they spoke little about their experiences with teachers. Virtually all the participants were successful “good” students. Thus one could deduce that conflicts with teachers were minimal. In this chapter, however, the issue of what is taught in history was raised. Ruth argued that the truth about history isn’t taught in

school, referring to a lack of education about white privilege and issues of power. This leads to an incorrect mainstream view among white people that “their way is the normal way.”

Second, Delpit argues that there is a “culture of power” which she defines as “codes or rules for participating in power” (p. 25). These codes include language forms, strategies of communication and ways of being including: “ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” (p. 25). The participants gave a similar definition for what they often called “white culture” or “cultural whiteness” or simply “white people.” Perhaps Alana summed it up best in her definition of “cultural whiteness” when she shared that cultural whiteness is about among other things having access to standard English (ways of talking), “ways of being, mannerisms, behaviors, knowing how to react, knowing how to decode behavior” (strategies of communicating), “dominating the knowledge base” (ways of writing),” and knowing “what white people do in their spare time” (ways of interacting). That virtually all the women excelled in school might point to some level of participation in and understanding of the cultural codes of power in the classroom.

Third, Delpit argues that “the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power” (p. 25). In her book she shares an example of how children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those who are not from middle-class homes. It is important to note that Delpit uses an example that refers to social status and not race. The dialogues in relation to a culture of power in the interviews focused almost exclusively on race (whiteness) not class. Although, Alana did state, “I know part of that is class but class and race are so mixed.” There were several

instances in which there were connections made between white people and those who have power implying that white people are those who have power. For example, Alana stated that white culture is invisible because it is the “mainstream” and “dominant” culture. She also stated that there is a historical legacy of white people taking land from people of color which has a current manifestation in white people feeling an unearned sense of entitlement to space.

Fourth, Delpit asserts that “If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (p. 25). Delpit argues that members of any culture implicitly transfer information to co-members. This works among members of a culture, but when there are attempts to implicitly transmit codes *across* cultures there is frequently a breakdown in communication. People are left saying, “What’s wrong with them, why don’t they understand?” (p. 25). Clearly, although the participants name whiteness as something outside themselves, these women have learned many of the codes of the culture of power from their white parent and perhaps other white family members. The majority of them have learned enough to be perceived as white by others. This requires more than a particular skin tone, it requires an understanding and demonstration, to some extent, of white cultural ways of being. It requires cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Since all of the women, except Linda, had significant relationships with their white parent, it would stand to reason that they would understand and exhibit white cultural ways of being that they were most likely implicitly taught. However, there was a mixture of understanding and confusion among the women in relation to cultural whiteness. There were definitely white cultural ways of being that surprised participants and left them asking, “What’s



wrong with them?” For example, this is evident in Bobbi’s questioning of how white people can be “selfish and aggressive.” Mindy also shared stories of being expected to know certain things about white ways of being that were foreign to her.

Finally, Delpit asserts that “Those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often more aware of its existence” (p. 26). Delpit states that it is “distinctly uncomfortable” for people with power to admit participation in the culture of power. “On the other hand,” she states, “those who are less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power variable most acutely” (p. 26). The participants are border crossers here in that they are both uncomfortable admitting participation in the culture, yet also able to recognize power. The participants occupy a dual position of operating both within and outside of the culture of power in relation to race. It is important to note that most of the participants were raised middle class and most of them were living middle class lives at the time of the interviews. Delpit’s definition of the culture of power is not limited to “cultural whiteness,” it is also about those who hold power, which relates to other social categories as well including class, gender, and sexuality. These women occupied multiple outsider and insider positionalities in relation to the culture of power more broadly defined. They also lived insider and outsider positionalities in relation to the more specific white culture of power. Furthermore, the reality is, as Alana aptly stated, that issues such as race and class cannot be easily separated.

Perhaps these stories reveal that although theoretical frameworks are necessary and help us to make meaning of situations, people’s experiences do not always fit so neatly into the outlines provided. We can occupy multiple positionalities simultaneously.

The distinctions between prejudice and racism in social justice theoretical frameworks serve as another example. This distinction is often appealing to those of us who teach about diversity and social justice because we want people to begin to understand issues of power that have been historically erased and silenced. However, where do white/of color mixed race people fall in that framework, especially those who pass and/or have a fair amount of cultural capital? One of the arguments in the participants' dialogues is that (the majority of) these women, because they identify as women of color cannot be racist, they can only be prejudiced against others because they don't hold the social power of whites. But the question is, do we/they hold the social power of whites? Sometimes we do, at least to some extent. I would argue, in line with the authors in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, that discrimination effects people of color as a whole in more detrimental ways than prejudice against white people because of institutionalized power imbalances. As such, I wouldn't call prejudiced remarks against white people racist, no matter who makes them. But when mixed race people are prejudiced against people of color, is that racism or internalized racism? If at times we don't "get it," if we are unable to see the operations of the culture of power, does that automatically make us white in that circumstance?

These questions relate to the questions Linda raises at the end of her second interview. If we examine our connection to whiteness, specifically our white privilege and the ways in which we are complicit in the culture of power, does that mean that we cannot be people of color? We are caught in a trap. To talk with white people about these issues makes us vulnerable to racism/prejudice, but to talk to people of color makes us vulnerable to being disowned or potentially oppressing others. Linda said that she has

the deepest discussions about where she stands in relation to whiteness with other mixed people who are mixed with white. She also said that one of the securities in dating white people is that then she does not have to worry about “oppressing others.” She will never be in the position of being an agent of oppression, only a target. Perhaps what is most striking is the sense of division, the segregation that exists even in our own lives between white people and people of color. We sometimes bring people together but is it only to occupy shared space or is it more integrated than that? In the next chapter, we will hear the stories of participants’ roles as mediators, translators, and educators. We will discover how participants claim agency through educating others and when and where participants feel obliged to build bridges and how that is attempted. Participants also share the ways in which they refuse to take on the burden of being an educator. It is another chapter in the story of insider/outsider positionality, border crossing and mediating differences.

**Bridge Builders, Translators, and Allies:  
The Responsibility, Burden, and Privilege of Educating Others**

*You need to be the translator. You have to speak their [white people's] language in order for them to hear. – Susan*

*I recognize that my feelings have changed and probably will keep changing, but I feel like it's both at the same time. The strongest part of me wants to say yeah, it sucks that I have to be in this position where I can educate people, and they need educating sometimes. But nothing is going to get better without somebody doing it, so I want to do it. But then at the same time sometimes I don't want that responsibility. I don't want that burden, and I'm tired of it. – Katherine*

*I just want to acknowledge how much power we hold, that we are the bridge between many communities and many people. – Marta*

The participants' stories about educating others focus primarily on ways to educate white people about racism, white supremacy, and more generally about the lives of people of color. There have been decades of debates about who should carry the burden to educate white people about racism. In response to a growing white feminist movement in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, women of color began to speak up and claim space in the public eye demanding to be heard and acknowledged. Women of color have always been active in women's issues, but their experiences and work were often overlooked (Hurtado, 1996). In 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* was published; women of color were calling for collectivity with other women of color and demanding that white women listen to and *hear* their stories.

Even as the women of color writers were sharing educative stories, they simultaneously wrote about the unfairness of being expected to teach white women about women of color and racism. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Yamada (1983) writes, "If

the majority culture know so little about us, it must be *our* problem, they seem to be telling us; the burden of teaching is on us” (p. 72). She argues that white women need to teach themselves. Moraga (1983), writing in that same book, makes a similar argument, however as a mixed race Latina/white woman, she calls for dialogue. She says,

I think: what is my responsibility to my roots – both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently. (p. 34)

The women’s narratives in this project speak to the same struggles that were being discussed back in the early 1980s by mixed race women and women of color. These women struggled with the burden, responsibility, and privilege of being able to build bridges between white people and people of color.

The women shared many thoughts, feelings, and stories in relation to educating people about racism and being mixed race. They discussed a variety of issues: the burden of having to educate in a way that white people can hear, their belief in change and skepticism, a desire to reject education others without compensation, a responsibility and a calling to be bridge builders and educators, the need to educate people they love, and the fear that they are not prepared to teach others. Collectively they grapple with the desire to educate, the knowledge to educate, the emotional drain of being a teacher, and the anger of being expected to educate.

### **Burden of Educating In a Way that White People Can Hear**

In the Boston group interview, Katherine told a story of one of her sisters being challenged around issues of race by a white man. Katherine said, “I don’t remember what she told me that she ended up saying, but I was trying to think with her, what could you say, to call somebody out on that kind of the comment.” There was then a discussion

among several members of the group about the difficulty of educating white people.

Joanna commented first.

Joanna: Part of the difficulty of this situation is finding a way to respond in which the person will actually hear what you have to say. Especially because if you get defensive- It's very clear to me in watching my own interactions, and watching interactions with other black woman, as soon as your neck starts moving, people stop listening.

Ruth: This is true.

Joanna: And that's genuine, that's what happens when I get angry. It just starts going. And people to stop listening. And so you have to find a way to educate them in a way that they will actually hear it.

Mindy: But yeah again, the idea of white supremacy, even in language and how you interact with people, it has to be this very narrow way. You can't get emotional because they don't understand that. They don't even see that their idea of objectivity is messed up, you know? Or they don't even have the baseline of the understanding that identity is made up of all these different things and not just based on appearance. They don't even understand color then, or economic discrimination or class, and homophobia, you know? And it's a lot of burden to place on individuals like us.

Joanna: (interrupting) to educate the masses.

Mindy: It's like okay we're going to educate you just based on our personal [experience], it's a huge thing.

Joanna: Yet it's very hard to detach the emotion from their response. But then they write you off as an angry black woman, or just an emotional woman, you know? It's obviously a touchy subject. And clearly they've hit on something and it's hard to respond and try to keep yourself in check when it's something you feel so passionate about.

Diana: They want us to respond as a white person.

Joanna: Right

Ruth: I get the angry black woman all the time.

Susan: You need to be the translator. You have to speak their language in order for them to hear.

Diana: You have a professional façade, your public façade, and your real self. And you have to know which hat to put on in different situations if you're going to survive, like in the business world. There is a certain culture where you work, how you're supposed to behave. You need to pick up those clues and get with it if you want to work here. If you can't, you know get with that, then move on. Because no matter what validity you have in your response in your way of delivering information for your research, whatever it is, if it isn't the white way, it isn't right. You are, you're, you're incompetent.

In the exchange above, Joanna started the discussion by talking about the cultural expectations of body language by white people, most specifically that “as soon as your neck starts moving, people stop listening,” a referent to cultural blackness. Ruth, another woman of African-American heritage, agreed with her. Joanna shared that moving her neck is something that is “genuine,” something that happens when she is angry, but realized that if she wants to find a way to “educate” in a way white people will hear her, that she needs to stop herself from displaying that form of body language because white people stop listening.

Mindy then steered the conversation away from the personal to interject her theoretical analysis of what occurs in that type of situation. She argued that when white people expect other people to talk and interact in a very “narrow” white way, a way that is non-emotional, that their expectation is a form of white supremacy. She said, “They don’t even understand that their idea of objectivity is messed up.” Mindy is referring to a white, patriarchal history in which reason is expected to be detached from emotion. This analysis coincides with Alana’s analysis quoted in the previous chapter where she defined cultural whiteness as being situated in scientific knowledge emerging from western modernity in a way that “dominates everyone’s ways of thinking and rationalizing, normalizing.” This belief in rationalization is culturally codified in whiteness. This connection between cultural whiteness and white supremacist thinking blinds people

from “understanding that identity is made up of all these different things and not just based on appearance.” As a result, white people are not going to understand racism, classism, or even homophobia. Ultimately, that places a “burden” on us as mixed race people and people of color to educate white people.

Joanna continued the conversation, bringing the focus back to the personal, claiming that it is “hard to respond and try to keep yourself in check when it’s something you feel so passionate about.” It takes work to “respond like a white person,” as Diana named it, and it is unfair. There is agreement among the group that in order to get white people to listen, one has to speak and act like white people. Susan refers to this as being the “translator.” Diana takes it a step further and names it a survival skill.

After Diana’s final comment above Joanna, shared a story of a play she saw titled, “Slanguage” about how the neighborhood slang of Latino and Black youth was not accepted in school even though,

It was clear in this play and in the things that they were reading that there was so much validity in these terms, in these phrases that they were using. But it was because they were not ‘proper,’ you would never use them in an office.

Here Joanna is expanding on what it means to teach so others can and will listen. The expected and accepted explanations require not only white cultural body language but also dominant white Standard English. Diana responded, “Their loss. They don’t listen and learn.”

Although Diana said, “It’s their loss” there were several stories she shared throughout her interviews of having to act culturally white in the sense of speaking “the Kings English” as Diana called it, straightening her hair, and minimizing her emotion. Diana attended Harvard Business School and worked as a top executive in corporate



companies. In that role she had to have her “professional façade,” as described in the earlier quote, in order to be viewed as competent. Also, as one of the older participants at 58, Diana had lived through times in which blatant discrimination happened more regularly and went unchecked. She had to know “which hat to put on in different situations” to “survive.”

Diana shared an example of a way in which she learned early to influence white people so that they would listen to her and respect her. She explained that she was “always sort of a goody two shoes and a straight A student.” When she was in the eighth grade she had a long-term substitute math teacher. She explained:

So, the first time we were going into the class the kids said to me, “Diana, talk like a white person and you can be the only white person in the class and let’s see how- if the teacher adopts you.” So, we all played this game on the teacher. I did not speak any Ebonics and the teacher did actually take to me and not to the other kids. It was a very interesting social experiment.

She “talked white” the whole time and it was clear to her and the class that she received special treatment as a result. Her stories of needing to “code switch” from one place to another are not unique to the mixed race experience. People of color have been doing so throughout U.S. history in order to survive. What is notable is that, as the mixed race kid, she had the capacity to do so from a young age. Her peers picked her to do what in all likelihood they could not do as well.

There is sometimes a fine line between educating others and enacting cultural whiteness in order to achieve success in white dominant institutions. In other words, sometimes the necessity to act culturally white is more about finding a way to succeed and achieve than it is about educating others so that they gain a greater consciousness of race issues and racism. Diana, for example, is not using her ability to act culturally white

in the example above in order to educate; she and her classmates never reveal their secret to the teacher. In order for that experiment to be potentially educative they would have needed to confront the teacher on his bias. However, she learned in that instance what privileges she could receive by acting white. Throughout her interviews Diana shares stories of needing to act culturally white to succeed in the business world. Other participants, however, talk specifically about striving to communicate with white people in “white ways” to help them gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of racism. In those instances they are using their cultural whiteness to help educate, but white people’s greater understanding still, in turn, helps them.

There were clearly moments in which for the women taking the role of educating others was more of a choice than a matter of survival. This may be more likely for the younger generation, as well as for those who may more easily enact white cultural ways of being. Joanna, who is 23, said in her individual interview,

I can manipulate what I say so that I do not compromise what I believe, but not step on people’s toes. Sometimes if I think they can handle it and they need to be educated, I’m very blunt about a lot of things. I especially take people off guard. Because I’m a woman and the things I say; I have a really dirty mouth sometimes. I’m very, very comfortable about my sexuality and I don’t have a problem talking about it. I know sometimes it’s not appropriate and I don’t bring it up. People are often shocked, especially older people. Older women are appalled by the things I have to say. They think it’s great and wish they could be as up front about it. But they’re always shocked. Even my mother who agrees with what I have to say and wishes she could say the things I say, is still taken aback by it sometimes. So sometimes I use that to my advantage and I stretch people’s comfort zone. But it’s to a degree and with compassion. Because it’s not to make them so uncomfortable they don’t want to hear anything you have to say. I don’t want to make anyone that uncomfortable. I just want to push their limits a little bit.

In this quote, Joanna is describing the liberty to speak her mind and “manipulate” in a way that does not feel like a “compromise” to her integrity. She explicitly named that her ways of being shock “older people,” alluding to a freedom she may possess as someone

younger, living in a new era that is less tolerant of discrimination. Key points in her description are that 1) she is stretching people to come out of their comfort zones but only to a degree, and 2) that she teaches with compassion.

In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (1997) there is an activity that describes how being on the “learning edge” requires us to stretch our “comfort zones,” but only to the extent that we don’t withdraw or completely resist (Griffin, pp. 68-69). In addition, several people who write about teaching to promote social justice emphasize the need to have compassion for learners (Boler, 2003; hooks, 1994; Bettez, in press; Shapiro, 2005). Hence, Joanna is employing techniques that diversity and social justice educators advocate to teach effectively about oppression. Joanna is an engineering graduate student, not a diversity educator, but through experience, she has learned how to teach people about issues of oppression in ways similar to those are “in the business” of diversity education.

It is important to note that Joanna is referring not only to teaching about race but also to teaching regarding issues of sexuality. Similarly, in another quote above, Mindy refers to teaching about racism, sexism, and homophobia. For many of these women, there is a sense that it is important to educate others about all forms of discrimination, not merely racism, which is an acknowledgement that all forms of oppression overlap. For instance, Joanna mentioned above that people are taken “off guard” because she is a woman and there are dominant cultural expectations of how women should behave. Her gender, race, and sexuality intersect.

In an individual interview, Janet talked about how for her, educating others is difficult when people are putting down her people; it is easier for her to defend attacks against groups of people to which she does not belong. She said,

I definitely experience the same thing [difficulty], and it's definitely when they're comments about brown people. Like I feel like it's a personal attack on me and my people, and you know I get that knot in my throat, and in my heart, and I feel my body tense up, and yeah, it's a different reaction but with any kind of comment that's coming from this anger and fear, you know, when people make comments about gays and lesbians in an offensive way. I mean all of that, I get angry, and it's hard. And I think it's harder to defend when it's about brown people, because I feel like as a straight person, if someone says something about, like if someone called someone a fag or something like, I can really- it's easier for me to say something, as a straight person, in defending that community. Because for some people it's easier to hear things when it's coming from someone that's like them, so if I'm talking to like a straight man or a straight woman, it's like it's easier for me to say, and I think for them to hear. But it's always hard.

Many of the women shared stories of feeling the need to call people out not only on racism but also on homophobia, sexism, and discriminatory comments in general.

### **Belief in Change and Skepticism**

There were varying degrees of belief among the woman about the possibility of change towards greater understanding of oppression as well as skepticism that people can or would want to learn. Tina was a believer in the capacity to unlearn oppression. In the group interview she said,

I always make allowances for people, and I always recognize that people can unlearn these things. They can unlearn racism; they can unlearn classism. So I try not to come at them in a hateful way but more like, "I suggest this book to you." I don't know.

This comment came at the end of a story she told about how she learned to think about race in new ways because of the exposure she had. She explained that because she "passes as white all the time everywhere, every day" even when she is with her Mexican family, that if she never went to college she thinks she "wouldn't be thinking about being

mixed race at all.” Marta revealed that she too gained a deeper understanding of oppression in college when she “got the vocabulary to make things make sense.”

Other people followed suit, acknowledging that they have been involved in a learning process as well. Alana said, “I’ve definitely been called out a lot” after which Tina admitted that she also has been called out by people of color. In a separate interview, Linda talked about how she has been educated about race issues by others. She said that her best friend of 15 years, a Latina, pushed her and talked to her about race to help her consciousness grow.

I have these few key people in my life that have been really key to my growth as well and she and I became feminists together, women of color feminists together. And our race and political consciousness were growing at the same time. I was like, I like this book. Check out Ana Castillo, what do you think of that? And let’s talk about this.

Thus some of the women admitted their own growth process around issues of race. They were taught by peers of color to better understand racism and learned through readings in college authored by people of color to better understand issues of race and oppression. Acknowledging their own growth process allowed some of the women to have greater compassion and belief that people can unlearn racism.

Joanna similarly talked about understanding that some people have just not had the exposure needed to understand issues of oppression.

Like last weekend we went to see a movie, it’s a documentary about the persecution in Tibet, and all the mess of what’s going on over there. I was telling [a fellow graduate student] about it before I went to go see it. I said, “I don’t really know too much about it. It’s about the Buddhist struggle in Tibet.” She was like, “Buddhists are being persecuted in Tibet?” It’s like, “Do you read the newspaper?” And you know, I understand why; she’s so sheltered. It makes sense; it’s just difficult for me. I kinda take on this personal charge to educate her. Which feels really arrogant but at the same time, it’s not that she doesn’t care. Because when she finds out about these things she’s really interested in them, but she just hasn’t been exposed.

Joanna, acknowledging that her classmate's misunderstanding came from lack of exposure, was not only willing but felt obligated to educate her friend. However, perhaps key in that story is that her classmate was always "really interested." She was willing and wanting to learn. Later in the interview, Joanna talked about how she likes it when people show interest in learning about her background. She prefers it when people show interest as long as they do so respectfully. She said,

They want to ask but don't know how and don't know what's appropriate, which I think is cute and endearing. As long as they're being respectful, which is most of the time. And it's a true curiosity; I think that's cute. I enjoy watching people be awkward and struggle with it, not know how to ask, because I'm happy to tell them my experiences. I'm happy to educate them. I'm happy to share my view. But sometimes I just wait for them to ask. And I know they want to.

It may sound cruel to watch someone squirm in wanting to know something, but again Joanna is referring to the difference it makes in being willing to educate when you truly feel that someone wants to learn.

Ruth, in one of her individual interviews, shared a similar sentiment. She said,

I actually prefer that people just show me their curiosity because to me if they can do that, they're going to learn something and that's one step closer to people getting along better, I think. It's just some things that I don't like. I think people have to have conversations more often about things that are different or scary or new or unusual or uncommon to them because then they ultimately realize, "Okay. You're really not as different from me as I thought." And it's good.

Ruth recognizes that change can happen through human interaction when people are willing to take the risk to ask questions and others are willing to respond. Ruth said that she is willing to educate. She said that people in Chicago generally say what they think and having grown up there, she carries that way of being with her. She had found that in Boston, where she was living, people didn't always want to know the answer.

Ruth shared a story of outright telling a woman why she didn't want to hang out with her. She explained,

She [the woman] asked, "Why don't you want to hang out with me?" I said, "Well, I don't think we'd be good friends." I said, "If you want me to explain that further, I can." She goes, "That's okay. That's okay." She said, "Well, good luck in Boston." I said, "Okay. Thanks." Then she wrote me back and said, "Actually, I do want to know." So I told her. And so many people were like, "Oh, my God. Why would you ever say that to somebody? Why would you ever say that you thought that she was elitist?" I thought, "Because she wanted to know the truth." She asked. I didn't put it out there to crow. I'm not- I don't believe in being unnecessarily cruel to people, but if you want my honest answer, I'll tell you.

For Ruth, it was "bizarre" that people would "sugar-coat" how they felt about a situation.

Diana and Bobbi, however, were much more skeptical that people are teachable. Diana said about white people, "What's their motivation to change?" Diana reported that Boston is now a minority-majority city, yet that isn't reflected in people who hold government offices and people of color are "still getting less resources and less attention and less respect than white people." She added, "So you have to ask yourself, 'How brown does America have to get before white people get it?'" Later she talked about how even though there are more "minorities" in the country, they are "still clustered in the bottom level of the economic ladder and the educational system and the job market." She said,

So, why are these white people going to change? Nobody gives up power. You have to take it, and I think the only way you can take it is either by force, and there's not enough minorities to do it by force, or by getting inside and changing things.

It is important to note that Diana is focusing on white people's *motivation* to change.

However, her final sentence implies that she believes there is *capacity* for change, by "getting inside and changing things." In other words, she believes that her presence and

the presence of other people of color inside white institutions can ultimately change the power structure.

Diana shared a story of walking out of a staff meeting when a co-worker said something about the drawback of having to work with a “nigger.” As she was exiting, her boss begged her not to leave, and the woman who made the remark apologized soon after. Diana remarked,

So, that may be an example of why white people- how white people had to change, but had I not been in that job and if I had not stood my ground, there would never have been any recognition of their wrongfulness.

Often Diana’ stories focused on issues of social class. She believed that in order to make it ahead in life people had to gain access to money and white ways of being. If she had not gone to Harvard, she probably would not have had the kind of job where she would have been in a meeting like that and thus would not be able to effect that kind of change. Although she was skeptical about the capacity to educate white people, she believed it was possible in large part through access to money and subsequently social status.

Bobbi, if you recall, is the person who believed that white culture is a xenophobic culture. She believed that it is in white people’s “nature” to put down people of color and be “hateful” and “distrustful” of outsiders. She said, “With white people it always comes back to race. Like they’ll always say some shit that’s so stupid.” She didn’t believe in white people’s willingness and capacity to unlearn racism.

From these stories it is apparent that there was a continuum of belief in the capacity of people with power to unlearn and understand oppression. Most of the participants believed in other people’s capacity to change. The only participant who indicated that she truly didn’t believe change was possible was Bobbi.



### **That's Their Problem or I Should Get Paid for It**

In the Oakland group interview there was a discussion about whether or not people felt a responsibility to educate. Bobbi responded, "Are you talking about educating white people? No, no way, that's their problem. That's what I think. It's just like too draining you know?" Linda also admitted, "I didn't want to be an educator ever. I was always like, fuck you. Go away. I don't want to deal with your shit because it's too hard. Then I started dating white people." Thus for Linda, she didn't want that role as an educator but later changed her attitude towards believing she needs to be an educator.

Ana also talked about not wanting to take on the burden of educating. She said,

My work world is very white, staff wise. Yet, I work with a lot of brown young people. That's kind of interesting being a minority in lots of different ways with my staff, feeling like I have an outsider perspective, and feeling like I'm the only one who has that. Not wanting to have the burden to be the one to always speak up about certain things, or educate about how oppression works.

Although Ana didn't want the burden, she often took on the role of an educator or bridge builder, as will be discussed later in the chapter.

Alana didn't outwardly refuse to educate but felt she should be compensated for her work, she said,

I don't feel I can talk openly with most white people without having to explain to them things and constantly breaking everything down. And then it becomes about me serving them and educating them which I do all day long school, and with my students. And then it becomes, it's like I want get paid to do that. I don't want to have to do that constantly in my life all the time.

As a graduate student who also taught, Alana felt she often acted as an educator around issues of oppression with her white students. Thus she did indeed get paid for some of her educating. She felt like outside of that professional role she needed to put energy into herself and "other people of color in the ways that we've been hurt." Alana didn't refuse

to educate but she put boundaries around how much, with whom, and when she expended energy to educate people on issues of oppression.

Ruth had a similar approach to educating others which came out when I asked how her parents felt about her being queer. She said that they were not okay with it at all, but she felt like it was up to them to deal with their feelings. She said, “I’m going to be who I am and then everybody else can figure it out on their own. It’s not my responsibility to make them get it.” I asked her how she kept that perspective. She responded,

I don’t know. I think maybe it’s knowing that it’s just way too much – it would involve way too much work and way too much energy to get people to come around. I can’t educate the world on this stuff. I’ve got shit to do. I can educate– I can try to educate people to a point, and then I’m done. I don’t want to take that on. It’s too much. It gets old educating people on how to treat people. It’s tiring. I can say it once, but I’m not going to do it too many times after that. I can only hope that they figure it out. I think it’s also realizing that you can’t change- you can’t necessarily change people, but you can change the way you respond to them and my response is to just go about my business and stay true to myself and make sure I’m happy.

Like Alana, Ruth was willing to educate others but also put limits on the amount of time she was willing to invest in people. She recognized that she could only control her actions and responses to people and stay true to herself. Ultimately other people need to take responsibility to learn.

### **A Responsibility and a Calling to be Allies, Educators, and Bridge Builders**

In the Oakland group interview, Tina said that because she could pass, she felt it was her responsibility to be an “ally” to people of color “as much as possible.” Marta felt similarly and said,

I feel like because I have white skin privilege, I feel like it's my calling to do that. Just as you were saying (to Tina) to be an ally to people that have darker skin and

get much more racism than I do. So I do speak up a lot, especially when it's about somebody else. I have a much harder time speaking up about myself.

Alana chimed in,

I definitely feel like I do [have a call to educate], as hard and frustrating as it is to educate white folks all the time every day. It's my life. And I feel I should be getting paid to do so. It's something that I feel a responsibility to do because I understand whiteness.

Again Alana argued that she feels she should get paid for her time and effort educating; nonetheless, she felt a calling to educate “white folks” because she understands whiteness. Alana then added,

I also feel like more so, I'm thinking, in terms of education around sort of identifying my community whatever that is, thinking about doing education around sexuality and gender stuff within communities of color is also something that I'm thinking a lot about in terms of like, I want to say providing resources in sort of a paternalistic way, for poorer working class folks specifically. Because I've had access to theory, and the academic theory specifically, I feel like that is a resource. And I definitely want to feel like I can provide that for folks who don't have that resource. So that's actually something I've been thinking about, how to start doing that work. And it's also doing work around privilege, for people color with class privilege. That's something else I've been thinking about. Because I don't feel like I have a lot of conversations with a lot of other people of color with class privilege as people of color specifically. That's also something that I would like to start thinking more about and having conversations with folks about.

For Alana, the call to educate moved beyond the scope of educating white people about racism and included educating people on issues of sexuality and gender. Specifically, she named a desire to work with other people of color, to work with her community to share her academic knowledge as a resource.

As mentioned earlier, there was a high level of consciousness among the women about the intersectionality of oppressions. Linda summed this up stating,

As much as I've always been like, I don't want to be an educator, I don't want to have to teach people, blah, blah, blah. It is real though, and that is kind of our role, often. I'm not saying as people of color, but as human beings, like to change the world and to make it more of a better place. We need to speak to one another

as humans and recognize that we're not always in the same place, where everyone has the same background, or political education, or experience even, to not be homophobic, and not be sexist, not be racist, not be ageist, or fat phobic, there are almost 50 million ways we can discriminate against each other. And all it takes is like a few minutes of being like, well what about this, or having that kind of dialogue. So that was a big learning experience; that was a big step for me.

Several of the women in the Oakland group felt a calling or responsibility to educate.

This sentiment arose among other participants as well.

Susan argued that she used to “feel a responsibility” to teach but now she doesn’t concentrate on the intention of teaching. In that way, “the burden of translation is taken off” of her shoulders. She still responds when people ask her questions. However, instead of focusing on responding to educate, she responds how she wishes and recognizes that the listener “can hear whatever they want from it.” By not “catering” what she says to someone else she finds that it “frees up [her] emotional energy.” Thus she is still educating but not claiming “responsibility” to do so.

Shortly after that statement, Katherine responded with her thoughts about claiming a responsibility to educate; she took a position of feeling both a responsibility to educate and a desire to shuck the burden of being an educator. She said,

I recognize that my feelings have changed and probably will keep changing, but I feel like it's both at the same time. The strongest part of me wants to say, “yeah, it sucks that I have to be in this position where I can educate people, and they need educating sometimes.” But nothing is going to get better without somebody doing it, so I want to do it. But then at the same time sometimes I don't want that responsibility. I don't want that burden, and I'm tired of it. I think people even when they ask harmless questions, you know, they are asking you, and for them it's the first time that they've thought about it or asked somebody. But for you it's like the umpteenth time this week that somebody's asked me that and they don't understand that.

Thus Katherine teetered between owning responsibility and wanting to release the burden of educating. Katherine, as you may recall, was described by her sister as the most

“exotic” sibling, and she was the participant who was asked most often the, “What are you?” question. It makes sense that she would want to evade the responsibility to educate because, with her highly ethnically ambiguous look, people confronted and questioned her about identity and race issues on a constant basis.

Ruth also acknowledged that her identity as a mixed race woman made her “a lot more sensitive to race relations.” In addition, watching her mom deal with issues of race helped her “to have conversations with white friends without it being scary for them.” She said,

I think I'm able to give them [white people] a safe space to talk about that stuff without making them feel like they should feel ashamed, because I think it can be hard to be a person of color, but I think it's also hard to be white, too. That is hard. On one hand, you get privilege to be white, but on the other hand, it alleviates some privilege because a lot of people direct their anger toward you in maybe a blanket way that's not fair.

Ruth’s empathy for her mom’s experience as a white woman dealing with issues of race and her understanding of race issues through the lens of a mixed race woman helped her to find ways to talk to white people in non-threatening ways.

In the Albuquerque group interview, Maria and I both discussed the feeling of responsibility we each held to confront others on their racism as light skinned people of color in graduate school. I said, “People who often have a hard time interacting with people of color sometimes feel more comfortable around me. Then I wonder, what does that mean, what are their expectations, and how can I challenge those?” Maria recalled her time in graduate school and how she and the other person of color in her program were both light-skinned and felt that others expected them to be complacent. She said, “Because of that I know that went in even stronger, I mean even in theory classes I was bring up racism. I was just not going to let anyone off the hook.” We felt the added

responsibility of educating white peers about issues of race knowing that issues of racism contributed to the fact that many of the people of color in graduate school were light skinned.

Another way that people spoke about their responsibility to educate was through the concept of bridge building. Ana said,

I think I spent a fair amount of time thinking of myself as a bridge builder. Which in a natural way became thinking of myself as an outsider. I think at some point, I was thinking where are the people that match me? Where are they? Where are they? I felt like an outsider in that way and an outsider as a vaguely brown person in a mainly white peer group I hung out with in college or just feeling like an outsider in different ways. But also utilizing that I have these neat perspectives, because I live between different worlds. To me the bridge building is being comfortable with things that are simultaneously true, and sometimes may be in conflict with each other, and you still have to deal with it and move your way forward.

Ana, feeling like an outsider as a “vaguely brown person” in mainly white communities, took her positionality, of living “between different worlds” that are simultaneously valid, as an opportunity to build bridges. She added,

I think I’ve accepted some level of responsibility in terms of being a bridge builder. I’m just trying to figure out where my natural talents and my life experiences come together in a way that I feel like I’ve got a contribution to make to the community. Bridge building is definitely one of the things. But I acknowledge that when stuff happens, yeah, I’m not a super girl. And people need to have responsibility for things that happen. They need to be accountable, either they will be or they won’t.

Ana began to accept a level of “responsibility” as a bridge builder. However, she simultaneously learned that there were limits to her capacity build bridges. It would only work in so far as people were willing to be accountable for their actions.

Linda also articulated her positionality as a bridge builder stating,

But yeah, the bridge, and the power that we hold, an opportunity we have. I think it's really exciting, and like I feel that we are on the forefront of transnationalism

on like a whole new generation. My little cousins, they can say it's all around us people, it's all around us.

Not only does she have the power to build bridges, but she is highlighting the increasing power to do so that will come with the new generation of mixed race people. Linda informed me that all of her Japanese aunts married white people so all of her cousins are mixed race. In her experience, there is a clearly growing population of mixed race people who will also have the power to build bridges.

### **Teaching People We Love**

Many participants named a calling and/or responsibility to be educators and bridge builders about issues of oppression. Several of them stated that this responsibility came from either living in two worlds, understanding whiteness, and/or having the privilege to pass. However, there was another reason why these women found a need to be educators around issues of race – because they have white people in their lives who they love. Some of the women found it easier to educate people they were close to, others found it more difficult.

In the Oakland group interview Bobbi said, “I’m not trying to call my mom on her shit, she’s an adult.” Linda validated her, stating that it is hard to go there with people “who you love and care about. That’s hard. Because the risk is that they’re going to be hurt terribly.” Throughout her interviews, Linda talked about the difficulty of trying to educate her white girlfriend about racism knowing that she often felt hurt in the process. Her girlfriend at the time had little education around race issues and as a result would at times make comments that were “kind of off.” Linda explained,

She said something that rubbed me the wrong way, and I freaked out. I was like, oh shit, I can't tell you to fuck off because I love you. And I came to the realization that this is my role. I feel like we have a responsibility to talk to each

other, even if it's hard, even if it means that I'm the one being like, okay you're pissing me off, but I will be really calm and talk to you about it and help open your eye about it. And it's weird because I'll do it with random ass strangers before I'll do with people I love.

Linda, who had the tendency to not want to educate, found herself in a position where she had to in order to maintain a relationship with someone she loved. Later in the interview Bobbi said, "I call people out." I challenged her saying, "except for your mom." She responded, "I have to deal with my mom for the rest of my life, you know? I don't want to make waves now."

Alana then said,

I have the opposite experience with my mom. I'm trying to educate her every chance I can with this consciousness around the whiteness and privilege in the ways that she hurt me, and the ways that her family hurt me. And it's been hard. It's really almost, like, destroyed our relationship at times.

Alana explained that her mom "knows some of the language around antiracist white stuff" and knows what "white privilege is" because of being privy to Alana's struggles and experiences with racism. Still she found herself wanting and needing to educate her mom and other white people in her life. She recognized that she needs to "set some boundaries" but felt a responsibility to talk to people she loves. She stated,

I have to say something that, honestly, I don't think that most white people really change or understand racism without interpersonal work, really learning from people that they love and care about. Like, they can read every book in the world about imperialism and colonialism and not understand how they actually act in the ways that they do, not recognize how they treat people and understand what it means to be a white person, without people of color that actually love them and are willing to get in that conversation with them. And it's hard, it's hard. But I feel like for me, those white folks I have in my life that really have changed, have done so from people of color continually schooling them and calling them out on their shit. So it's kind of a slippery [slope], you know, like how much? Well we get to choose, we still get to choose, and it makes sense for us to do what we can. For me, when it makes sense for me, I do it, and when it doesn't make sense I can set boundaries and say no, I'm not going to do that for you.



As much as Alana didn't want to take on the burden of educating others, she really believed that interpersonal communication between white people and people of color about issues of race is the most effective way for white people to begin to understand racism. As such, she felt an obligation to "school" white people but she also realized that she needs to set limits for herself, to take care of herself.

Janet, like Alana, found it easier to talk to people she is close to. Janet struggled, in general, with speaking out but admitted,

The closer I am to someone it's easier for me to speak out, you know like with my father for example, but if it's like my friend's friend or something and we're all sitting in like a bar or something, it's like that's not lecture time, and I don't want to be your teacher, and always feeling like I have to teach people too. And I don't always want to do that. Like I just want to relax and not have you say these comments to me. So that's hard.

Janet found it easier to challenge people with whom she is close.

### **Not Necessarily Prepared to Educate**

Another thing that Janet struggled with was not feeling able to educate others. As she reflected back on her life she remembered that often she didn't stand up for herself or her friends. She had trouble letting go of feeling bad about herself for her failure to act. However, she is now arming herself with the knowledge to confront people as she does work with media literacy. She wants to do work in media literacy education so that she can "show stereotyping in the media."

Tina still is unsure of her abilities to challenge people on oppression. She said,

I don't know if I can be an educator because I don't feel completely educated myself. I don't know, I know how to confront people around racism, but I don't know how to, I guess, guide them from doing that. I still have to deal with that myself.

Tina admitted her lack of skills in confronting others. She also was actively working toward gaining new knowledge, for example, taking courses in graduate school to further her understandings. In addition she shared several stories of calling people out on oppressive remarks. So, despite her feeling of not having enough education to educate others, she still spoke up against injustice and prejudiced remarks.

Brittney told stories in which she could be identified as a victim of racism yet she, self-reportedly, didn't really see racism. However, as a result of the group interview and the project, she began to interpret her experiences through a new critical lens. With this new lens, she felt she would educate and challenge others more often. She said, "I won't just blow it off. I would tell them why it was offensive and hopefully me telling them will make them not do it again."

Ana also shared a story of an experience in which she was "caught between two perspectives" when a white person and a person of color got into an argument about something. She explained,

I felt very loyal to both of them. I think both of them were right and both of them were wrong. One was more wrong than the other. It all happened so quickly, and then it was over and I was just there. I felt I wasn't equipped to deal with it.

Although Ana was as articulate in her thoughts on race, racism, and other forms of oppression as some of the other participants, she still felt she had more to learn to be an effective bridge builder.

So, the women struggled with various complications of educating others including: the fear of hurting people they love, not feeling adequately equipped to confront people, struggling with taking on the responsibility to educate and simultaneously setting boundaries for self-care.

## **Conclusion**

As mixed race women straddling the borderlands of several social categories, these women often found themselves in the position of educating others. The women had complex and sometimes conflicting feelings about educating others about racism, being mixed race, and about oppression more generally. Their ability to educate others, both in terms of experience and opportunity, was perceived as a responsibility, a calling, and a burden. There were times when these women wished and wanted to say, “No, I won’t do it.” Overall, however, they appeared to on take the challenge of teachable moments. Three main motivating factors emerged for accepting the responsibility of teaching about oppression. First, for some, they needed to educate and talk so they could be heard in order to be taken seriously and perceived as “competent.” In other words, they had to educate others in order to pave the way for their own success in white institutions. Second, these women, as a collective, had an overall strong sense of commitment to social justice. Several of them stated, through the telling of their stories, that they desired a world without racism, sexism, and homophobia. Thus, as women fighting for social justice they felt the need to do their part to eradicate oppression, to use their borderland positions, and (for some) their privilege, to pass as white to build bridges between white people and people of color. Third, they all had white people in their lives who they loved. In negotiating those relationships, at times the white people they loved made comments or took actions (or failed to take actions) that felt oppressive and hurtful. As such, they were caught in a trap of either educating the people they loved so they would be hurt less often, not educating and continuing to be hurt, or not having the people they loved in their lives any longer (which sometimes, as in the case of white moms, was not

an option). These women have strong motivations, in both public and private spheres, to educate others about issues of oppression, especially related to race.

In light of some of the motivations these women had to educate, it is useful to look at the more complex factors that played into the relationship dynamics as they tried to educate. Their stories speak to two important theoretical concepts related to race issues and racism: double consciousness and code switching.

W.E.B. DuBois coined the term “double-consciousness.” He wrote about double consciousness in his 1903 autobiographical book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He said,

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Dubois, 1996, p. 5).

DuBois wrote about black people’s ability to understand the viewpoint of white people – “the American.” People of color, in order to navigate white culturally codified institutions have always needed to understand white consciousness. Thus, the double consciousness that these women occupy, in understanding culturally codified habits and practices of both white people and people of color (at least the ways of their respective racial/ethnic groups), is not something unique to mixed race people.

This double consciousness also connects to Lisa Delpit’s (1995) articulation of the culture of power. Double consciousness entails understanding the operations of the culture of power. In terms of race, this refers to understanding the culture of white people. Of course, white people have the greatest access to the white culture of power

and because white culture is the culture of power, white people have the freedom to never have to understand other people's cultures. Most institutions – work, school, healthcare, etc. – are dominated by white leadership and structured around white culture. White people are thus advantaged to succeed. People of color, however, have been forced to adapt to white ways of being to successfully navigate white institutions. They have had to “code-switch.”

Code-switching is term that refers to “linguistic adaptation in different environments” (Wikipedia, African American Vernacular English, ¶ 8). However, code-switching goes beyond language to include body language and mannerisms. This is made apparent by the stories the women tell about needing to act and talk “white” in order to be heard. For example, Joanna said, “It's very clear to me in watching my own interactions, and watching interactions with other black woman, as soon as your neck starts moving, people stop listening;” the other women of African-American descent in the Boston group interview agreed. Diana summed up the group sentiment, “they want us to respond as a white person.”

Again, code switching is not unique to mixed race women, people of color in the United States have been code switching since colonization. Diana's story of “acting white” in her eighth grade classroom, however, reveals a capacity to code switch from a very young age, something to which she has been granted access by having white culture modeled in her home. All but one of these women (Linda, who was raised by her Japanese mom and Black step dad) have been heavily immersed in white culture in their homes so it is not so much a switch as a need to emphasize one way of being over another. Linda was granted access to white culture as a person who can pass in a society

in which whiteness is dominant. Regardless of how and to what extent these women have access to white culture, the stories these women tell support the writings by people of color who emphasize that white culture is dominant and that sometimes acting white in terms of spoken language and mannerism is necessary in order to be best heard and respected by white people.

There is a general sense among the women of a responsibility to educate coupled with anger that the education has to be conducted in a manner that suppresses any of their cultural ways of being that are not in line with dominant white culture. However, several of the women state that they feel they must take the opportunities they have, especially those who have light-skin privilege, to help others unlearn oppression. At the same time, however, they argue that they need to set boundaries to take care of themselves and to hold others accountable. Ana, for example, said that she wants to use her “perspectives of living between different worlds” to build bridges but recognizes that “would only work in so far as people were willing to be accountable for their actions.” Throughout the participants’ stories there is a sense that overall, these women believe in the capacity of white people (and other people who hold social power) to unlearn and understand oppression but that capacity is only as great as people’s willingness to learn.

Linda talked about how she felt like she learned the most about racism and oppression from dialogues with people of color. So I asked Linda specifically, how do we dialogue with one another? She said,

Well, one we have to actually speak to one another. I think it has to happen in schools. I think it has to happen at a way young age. I think people need to be learning about other cultures, and learning race tolerance and cultural understanding at a very young age. And with fucking homophobia too. We need to get it [race tolerance and cultural understanding education] to elementary school and be like, “Look, gay kids are cool, brown people are cool, be tolerant of

each other. You have a lot to learn, look at all of this diversity around you, and look at all the cultural riches that you have to learn from. That's a gift. That's a blessing, and not something to be afraid of or stereotype, or ostracize, or otherize, or whatever." We should be talking about it, definitely.

It is hopeful that these women are willing to take on the responsibility of bridge building. People of color have been stepping up to educate white people for centuries, and many white people have stepped up to be allies of people of color (Thompson, 2001). However, I agree with Linda; we need to be approaching the issue of eliminating oppression on an institutional level. It needs to happen in schools on a systematic level starting at a young age.

Perhaps the strongest message these stories are sending is to people who hold social power, most specifically white people who hold racial power. They are saying: Listen to us and other people of color and mixed race people and learn about who we are and what we have to offer. It is not fair that we are expected to always speak to you in ways that are most comfortable to you. Step out of your comfort zone and meet us. Don't force us to talk and act "white" to be heard. Listen to us and treat us with respect and dignity.

Overall, these women are also saying that it makes a difference when others demonstrate genuine interest in learning. Thus the reciprocal exchange can be that white people make the effort to demonstrate interest and that mixed race women then take the time and effort to educate with compassion. In order to continue the exchange, white people need to be accountable for their actions and statements. This means that when white people are being "schooled" about racism they need to be willing to actively listen to what they are being told, take responsibility for oppressive actions, and strive not enact

racism in the future. In addition, white people can make efforts to *educate themselves* through courses and books about racism and privilege and other forms of oppression.

Although these women's stories focus on educating about issues of race, it is important to remember that racism is intricately intertwined with sexism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of oppression (Collins, 2000). As mixed race women we can be bridge builders, but education about issues of oppression needs to happen on a much grander, institutional level. Change toward justice will only work in so far as people with power are willing to be accountable and actively pursue ways to dispel stereotypes and unlearn racism and other forms of oppression.



## **Lessons Learned and Implications**

*Being mixed is very difficult in a society/culture that does not have a complex notion of race; you are gray in a context where only black and white are seen to exist. But that is also the gift of being mixed, to be able to see the subtleties in all sorts of contexts, not just when thinking about race, where others cannot. –Susan*

The statement above is a response to a question I posed to all participants via email in which I asked, “What do you think is most important for readers to take away from your stories?” I begin with this quote because it relates to why I chose to undertake this study of conducting individual and group interviews with mixed race women. As an educator who teaches about social justice and the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, I wondered how stories by mixed race women might complicate and enrich our notions of racial politics. In particular, I hoped that the collective stories of these women might open up new possibilities for intercultural communication. I believe in the power of critical hope (Boler, 2003) – hope that is coupled with responsibility. I wanted to find stories that might illuminate new ways to promote equitable interactions and minimize divisions between people. I hoped that their stories might shed some light on interplays between agency and structure as they described their embodied mixed-racialized experiences at home, at school, at work, and in society at large. As a *mestiza* who deeply loves both of my parents and extended family members, this project of increasing critical hope for racial unity is highly personal.

I have trepidation as I write about my goal of promoting “unity” with this project because “unity” and “the mixed race experience” are both concepts often promoted

uncritically without attention to issues of power, oppression, and privilege. Mixed race people and hybridity are currently hot topics. At least monthly I receive phone calls or emails from colleagues and friends calling to my attention radio programs, television shows, novels, theories, and advertisements related to mixed people. We are everywhere. We have always been everywhere, but recently mixed races experiences are being named as such. This work is a direct response the growing fascination with mixed race people and the postcolonial concept of “hybridity.”

As I was about to start my field research, my partner bought me a book she found at Barnes & Noble related to my research topic titled, *Breeding Between the Lines: Why Interracial People are Healthier and More Attractive*, published in 2006. The author Alon Ziv, a psychobiologist who used to work as a “highly respected biology teacher at UCLA” (back cover), argued that, “Interracial people have greater genetic diversity which means they are more symmetrical. It also means they are smarter, taller, and grow faster, but the real crux is symmetry” (p. 111). Symmetry is “the goal of your developing body” he explains. “If you have achieved it, you’ve got it made” (p. 111). Ziv then refers to a UCLA study in which biracial people were found to be “more symmetrical and attractive than their unracial peers” (p. 112). His book is founded on heterosexist assumptions, much of his evidence is questionable, and his conclusions are dangerous. But perhaps most disturbing to me about his work is that he explicitly states that the goal of the book, “is to encourage unity” (p. 88). Yet, he is promoting one group of people as superior to others. Promoting a race-based hierarchy is antithetical to racial unity. His book is a perfect example of why I hesitate to claim unity as a goal of this work. By no

means do I wish to imply that mixed race people are the answer to racial divides or superior to “uniracial” people.

However, I did find that the stories these 16 participants shared shed some insights on my original research questions. They also raised issues for consideration that I did not originally set out to learn; in other words, their teachings went beyond my initial questions. It is important to remember that these women represent a particular segment of the mixed race population – that of (mostly) middle class, highly educated, (for the most part) politically conscious, women between the ages of 24 and 58 with an average age of 32. Most of the women (13 of the 16) were light-skinned enough to “pass” as white in at least some situations, although some of them infrequently. There was, however, a half and half (no pun intended) mixture of self-identified straight women and self-identified queer, lesbian, or bisexual women.

### **Navigating Hybridity**

One research question I had upon approaching this work was: *How do these women navigate their “hybridity” and why does this matter?* To recap, hybridity in this conception refers to the women’s embodied mixed-race existence and the meaning of their life choices in wider discourses.

#### *Identity Formation – But Not White!*

I found that there were a variety of factors that influenced racial and ethnic identifications among the women including: language, home culture, the depth of relationships to each parent, the racial make up of the communities in which the women were raised, school culture, the diversity of friends, and appearance. In addition, several of the women changed their self-identifications situationally and/or over time. Their

stories remind us that it is possible to hold multiple racial and ethnic identities simultaneously; all of the women do so.

These findings of multiple racial positionalities are overall consistent with the findings by Renn (2004) in her ethnographic study of mixed race college students in which she found monoracial, multiracial, extraracial, and situational identities. Renn also found similar influencing factors in identity formation including: cultural knowledge, academic microsystems, social and recreational microsystems, and physical appearance. The main distinction among my participants was that *none* of the women in my project claimed a monoracial *white* identity. Physical appearance appeared to be a larger factor in racial identification among Renn's participants than it was among my participants.

### *Fluidity*

A common theme among writings about mixed race experiences is fluidity and ambiguity of identity. Korgen (1998), who interviewed forty biracial black/white adults, argued that since the civil rights movement there is greater choice for mixed black/white people to claim both their black and white heritages. She claimed that the transformation of identity biracial people exhibit, from monoracial to biracial reveals the fluidity of race (p. 118). Ifekwunigwe (2004) in her research with white-English and English-African mixed people, argued similarly that her participants' stories revealed an ability to "negotiate, challenge, and subvert" all of the racialized subject positions of white, black, and mixed (*métis(se)*) (p. 183). Mahtani (2001) also demonstrated her participants' ability to experience their mixed race identities in paradoxical yet positive ways. Renn (2004) found that 72% of the women in her study claimed situational identities. One of

the principal characteristics of people in that pattern were that they “considered identity fluid and contextual” (p. 220).

Fluidity was also a significant theme among my participants. Like the participants in other studies of mixed race, the women in my project negotiated, challenged, and subverted racialized subject positions in paradoxical ways. For example, two of the participants resisted claiming identities as people of color, yet they simultaneously rejected white identities. My participants told numerous stories of transcending racial divides as they moved fluidly between groups of people of various races and ethnicities. A related, self-described attribute that many of the women possessed was open-minded, critical thinking. Mahtani (2001) found similarly that her participants claimed an ability to understand marginality that they linked to their status as multiethnic individuals. Some of my participants explained that they felt that being mixed race helped them to think critically and that the fusion of being mixed race helped them to be open-minded to diverse perspectives.

However, in contrast to what Mahtani reported, some of my participants offered a critique of that belief. Maria, for example, challenged our notions of categorizing all people from one race as the same. In other words, although it’s clear that mixed race people understand the fusion of diverse perspectives on a personal level, monoracial people are not precluded from having the same experiences because *not all people of color are the same*. Maria cautioned that by emphasizing our supposed uniqueness as mixed people we are inadvertently perpetuating stereotypes that all Latinas, or all black people, etc. are the same. A Latina who has, for example, one parent from Cuba and another from Nicaragua, may also understand diverse perspectives on a personal level.

Linda and Alana argued that there are prejudiced mixed people, just as there are prejudiced people of all backgrounds, and that open-mindedness is more directly related to how we are raised and to whom we choose to expose ourselves.

### *Structure*

As much as the women experienced fluidity they were also limited by social, cultural, and institutional structures. These women experienced challenges to their identities by strangers as well as in every major organizing institution of their lives. It is notable that the strangers who mistook these women to be white, by and large, were white people. Some of the participants felt that white people's misconceptions were based on a lack of interaction with people of color and/or mixed people, and a general self-absorbed, unobservant, entitled "white" demeanor. Yet participants encountered people who not only assumed they were white but wanted to suppress their mixed race identities and/or identifications with their heritages of color.

A theme that arose among family, school and friends, and work was *alienation*. It is perhaps not unusual for people to experience alienation from their families for a variety of factors. However, alienation based on racial and ethnic distinctions may be unique to those who are considered to have a different racial or ethnic orientation than their parents. The women described a significant amount of pain in feeling disconnected, dismissed, and misunderstood by parents, particularly white moms. Thus although the women claimed fluid identities, their ability to connect with parents was sometimes compromised by the structure of racial distinctions and identifications.

The women who attended predominately monoracial schools also experienced alienation by peers. The structure of schools put limits on the fluidity and comfort of the

participants in that space. Self-esteem was a primary rationale for the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to end segregation. It is clear that segregation had a significant negative effect on the self-esteem of several of the mixed race women in this project. Thus, as I argue in chapter five, these women's stories contribute to the arguments in favor of enforcing desegregation vs. equity in segregated spaces. However, we cannot overlook the fact that all of these women were successful in school, and most were *highly successful* as self proclaimed "smart girls" and evidenced by successfully completing degrees in higher education. What is unclear is the degree to which access to whiteness – through skin color privilege, class privilege, and/or the cultural capital of learning about cultural whiteness – contributed to their successes.

### *Lessons Learned*

These women were caught in the trap of negotiating mixed identities in a society that poses white identities and identities of color as binaries. Institutionalized racism creates racial divisions among white people and people of color. In opposition to racism and white supremacy, all of us choose to align ourselves with people of color in how we identify. Most of the women formed friendship networks that were predominately people of color, often including other mixed people. However, several of the women had white partners and/or close white relatives and some had close white friends. Although the women formed relationships with both white people and people of color, it appeared that often times they kept those communities separate. This hybrid space that Bhabha (1996) describes in which the colonizer and colonized meet is not as magical a place as it might seem in theory. The politics of racial divisions continue. We cannot escape the complications of our positionalities in relationship to both whiteness and oppression.

Fluidity and cultural understanding helped the participants gain access to various institutions and privileges, but it did not shelter them from alienation. This alienation was most apparent in the women's stories of schooling experiences in predominately monoracial schools. These women were able to negotiate the institutions of schools to achieve academic success; however, for many of them they suffered emotionally as outcasts in racially segregated schools.

The participants often found their identities challenged by white people. In addition, they often had white people in their lives who did not understand their experiences as mixed race women. Yet, overall, these women were willing to educate others through sharing experiences. However, there were a few conditions posed by a variety of participants: they wanted people to approach them with an open mind rather than disbelief, they wanted people to take the initiative to educate themselves about issues of race, and they wanted people to make the effort to actively listen to their stories.

Few of these women's parents talked with them about racial identity. Although my parents never explicitly talked to me about my mixed race identity, I found it surprising that so few of these women had discussions with their parents about being mixed race. Most of the women indicated that they wished they had more explicit discussions about race with parents and teachers. However, several women also mentioned that parents needed to realize that their experiences were distinct due to their experiences as mixed race individuals.

### **Communicating Across Lines of Racial Difference**

A second research question I had was: *What do the participants' stories demonstrate about the ways people might better communicate and comprehend one*



*another across lines of racial difference?* In autobiographical writings, mixed race people often allude to having enhanced skills for moving in and out of various ethnic and racial communities (O'Hearn, 1998; Camper, 1994; Walker, 2001). I wanted to examine these women's stories for what they might tell us about intercultural communication and comprehension.

This question overlaps with the first research question because communicating across lines of difference relates to navigating hybridity. There is a complex relationship between cross-cultural communication ability, desire, and need. These women had no choice but to communicate cross culturally as they moved from one side of the family to another and talked with one parent or the other. Although they embodied the races of both their parents, the mixture created a third positionality – being *mixed*. Whether the women primarily identified with their heritage of color, their biracial identity, or both, they were ultimately then put in the position of needing to communicate cross culturally with one parent and their extended family or both parents and all family members who were not mixed with the same heritages. For example, if Joanna's primary racial identity is mixed, she is communicating cross culturally when she interacts with both her black mom and her white dad. If Katherine's primary racial identity is black then interacting with her white dad entails communicating across racial difference. Consequently, these mixed race women did not have the luxury of avoiding cross-cultural communication on an intimate level.

In *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, Adams, Bell, & Griffin (1997) argue that one of the best strategies for challenging oppression systematically is through building diverse coalitions. They also argue for promoting “a sense of social

responsibility toward and with others” (p. 3). For those of us who wish to promote social justice, there is value in learning how these women built comprehension across lines of difference.

These women’s stories reveal a few key insights into cross cultural understanding. As explained in chapter six, four main factors emerged related to how these women were able to communicate cross-culturally. The first three were learned. First, they learned from a young age that there are multiple ways of being and each must be respected. Second they found that active, thoughtful observation was key to effectively learning about cultural differences. This conscious effort to recognize cultural differences, coupled with a demonstrated respect of each group’s customary ways of being, helped them to gain acceptance in various cultural groups. Third, they found that it was important not to co-opt habits and rituals of cultures to which they did not belong. Physical racial ambiguity was another influencing factor that contributed to their cross cultural acceptance and understanding; this was not learned, but a given.

The women shared stories about being frustrated with white people who did not take care or effort to learn about people of color and mixed race people. They also had stories of being confronted by people of color on prejudices and biases about race. Collectively, these stories demonstrated mixed race people as both agents and targets of racism. Just as they wanted to send a message to white people to listen and learn from other people of color, they also challenged themselves to be better listeners and recognize the ways they may be oppressing people of color through acting in dismissive, culturally white ways. From these stories, we can learn techniques to better communicate across lines of difference.

### *Lessons Learned*

Fluidity is not innate. Although some of the women had the benefit of physical racial ambiguity, the women learned fluidity, as it relates to communication and comprehension across lines of difference, through specific tasks: being exposed to multiple world views early on and learning active listening skills. Many scholars emphasize active listening as a key aspect of promoting equity and social justice (Gay, 2000; Delpit, 1993; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Nieto (1999), in her work on multicultural education, also argues that those with the most power have a greater responsibility to make accommodations. It was clear that these women felt similarly. In relationship to white people, they felt whites needed to take greater responsibility to learn and understand about mixed people and people of color. However, in their relationships with people of color, most often they realized they needed to do the accommodating because they held more social power by virtue of being part white. This was evidenced, for example, by Linda's concern that she was dominating conversations in meetings with her co-workers of color and her efforts to consciously step back to accommodate the needs of others.

### **Common Mixed Race Women Experiences**

The third research question I had approaching this project was: *Are there shared experiences that U.S. mixed women identify with that cross racial and ethnic lines?* Upon reflection I would say that the question is too broad to be answered through this project, but I can reflect upon shared experiences among the women *in the study* that cross racial/ethnic lines.

Each chapter illuminates shared experiences. Perhaps one of the most surprising commonalities among the women relating to identity formation was the shared strong desire to not identify as white; none of them shared stories of consciously choosing to identify as white. In fact, several shared stories of consciously rejecting white identities. Another less surprising commonality was the experience of fluid identities. The women relayed experiences of identifying and being labeled by others in various ways, both over time and situationally. The participants articulated a shared desire to name their racial and ethnic identities for themselves and not be told how they should identify by others. Perhaps the largest common denominator is that being mixed was related to both pain and privilege. This is evidenced for example in examining their lives in relationship to school in which they had the tools and privilege to be academically successful but the majority of them also suffered from feelings of alienation and exclusion based on race. Among many of the women there was an overarching sense of belonging nowhere and belonging everywhere simultaneously.

A common theme between the women was a desire for community with other mixed race people. In an often alienating and challenging atmosphere, several mixed race participants created a space that felt like home through friendships with other mixed women. Sometimes having these safe spaces allowed them to have more confidence in facing the pressures of the world.

### *Lessons Learned*

Ifekwunigwe (2004) argues that there have been three “ages” of writings on mixed race issues and people: 1) mixed race as pathological, 2) celebrations of mixed race identity, and 3) critiques of multiraciality as it relates to politics, policies, and

practices. These women's stories speak to all those ages. It is clear that some of the women had to combat negative stereotypes of what it means to be mixed race; the pathologizing of mixed race people still lingers. Some of the women also had uncritical celebrations of themselves and other mixed people. However, overall many of the women often had critiques of themselves and their positionalities.

Two other main topics arose that related to, but expanded upon, the original research questions: positionalities as racialized *women* and whiteness.

### **Positionalities as Racialized *Women***

As for the particular positionality as mixed race *women*, there are a few things to note. First, women family members in these women's lives played a large role in their self-identities. There was much more emphasis on the difficulties and influences of having white moms than experiences with white dads. In addition, moms of color and women extended family members of color generally played a significant role in these women's lives. Recall, for example, the two Latinas whose Mexican grandmothers passed along to them Mexican ethnic culture and Mexican identities. These relationships were highly valued by the women and assisted them in feeling comfortable with their mixed race identities.

Standards and perceptions of beauty also played a prominent role in these women's stories and experiences. The women shared painful stories related to not fitting in with either white, conventional standards of beauty or standards of beauty within their heritages of color. Examples include: Maria not being able to live up to the white standard of beauty of her mom, Susan and Diana being asked to straighten their hair by white people, Alana realizing she could never fit white models of femininity, Elizabeth

wishing she had lighter skin and a smaller nose, Mindy being told by her mom that it was too bad she didn't have light eyes and hair, Linda feeling too tall among other Japanese women, Ruth being ridiculed by black people for not straightening her hair, Tina dying her hair black to be recognized as Latina, and Ana and Mindy struggling with tomboy identities growing up. As I listened to these women's stories I couldn't help but wonder how perceptions of beauty – both white beauty and non-white ethnic beauty – factored into their ability to claim agency in certain spaces.

There were also some explicit connections made by the women of being questioned about their identities in ways that they felt exoticized. Janet, for example mentioned that often men would use her ambiguous identity as an opening for a potential pick up line. Alana discussed trying to affirm her beauty through “validation” from white men who often subsequently took advantage of her; she became a commodity. Sexual harassment and sexual promiscuity were intricately tied to issues of race.

In addition, systematically women occupy the role of educators and care takers. This imposed role factors into the responsibility, burden, and privilege of educating others. Due to their borderland positionalities, these women often found themselves in the position of educating others about oppression. As both women and people of color, among some of the participants, there was a tendency to want to reject the imposed role of educator. However, as a group, these women overall had a deep commitment to social justice and they desired a world without racism, sexism, and homophobia. This desire for equity created a strong motivation to educate others about issues of oppression in both public and private spheres. As they took on their roles of educators, they also sent a clear message that they want education on a wider level.

## Rejection of Whiteness – A Surprise Finding

Whiteness – what it is, how people enact it, denying it – was a huge part of the women’s stories. Because all these women are part white it was not a surprise that they told stories related to whiteness. However, there was a strikingly large amount of interview time dedicated to whiteness, which included descriptions and rejections of cultural whiteness.

In reflecting on their shared desire to reject white imposed identities, it feels important to acknowledge that these women had the privilege of rejecting white identities. I say privilege because in a society which is dominated by white people, people who are not white are left to find ways to navigate white institutional spaces and that often entails complying with the norms of white ways of being and rejecting other cultural ways of being. Although some of the women talked about the frustration of having to talk to white people like white people, only one person discussed consciously *having* to do this to keep her job; this was Diana, the oldest participant. For most women, they could choose to not enact cultural whiteness without serious repercussions. There is privilege in that choice. There is privilege in *knowing* cultural whiteness and there is privilege in being able to *reject* cultural whiteness.

There were a myriad of comments throughout the interviews about what constitutes cultural whiteness and about “white people” as a group. Individual and collective definitions of cultural whiteness unfolded during the interviews. The picture painted by their words included these images:

- Whiteness entails white privilege.
- White people hold the power to be racist.

- Whites act in racist ways that protect white supremacy.
- White people have the freedom to not think about race.
- Whiteness can't be separated from white supremacy.
- Whiteness is the dominant culture.
- White culture is invisible.
- Whiteness involves access to Standard English.
- Whiteness entails being able to not feel intimidated by people in authority positions such as teachers, police officers, and counselors.
- White people have a history of taking land from people of color and feel entitled to take up a lot of space.
- Whiteness brings an unearned sense of entitlement.
- Whiteness is related to dominant ways of thinking that promote rational thought and the notion of absolute truth.
- White people treat white people with more respect than they treat people of color.
- White people are more likely to listen to white people.
- White people make ignorant assumptions; and white people are selfish and aggressive.

Not everyone necessarily agreed with all the statements made but no one outwardly disagreed with any of the statements made in the group interviews.

The common denominator among the descriptions of whiteness is that they all hold negative connotations. They entail traits and characteristics that no one would want to admit having, except perhaps having access to Standard English. Whiteness was inextricably linked to racism and white supremacy. Only in rare moments were these negative discussions of whiteness interrupted by participants who would mention loved ones that they felt didn't reflect the negative attributes assigned to whiteness and white



people. More often there was agreement among the participants about the negative aspects of whiteness.

### **Theoretical Implications in Relation to Models of Oppression and Social Justice**

These comments about whiteness can be examined in relation to equity and oppression models. Much of what is described by the participants as “whiteness” or “white people” coincides with discussions of “oppression” in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. The authors in the edited book have a theory of oppression in which they distinguish between targets and agents of racism. In their conception only whites can be racist. Everyone has the capacity to discriminate or be prejudiced against any group, but in their model they reserve the term racist for “people who have access to social power and privilege” (Griffin, 1997, p. 72) which, based on United States history, they argue are white people. Griffin explains that “cultural imperialism challenges the alleged neutrality of cultural assumptions that in fact define and reinforce white supremacy and exposes racial images embedded in language and cultural practices that are promoted as neutral and inclusive” (p. 7). Their descriptions of racism and cultural imperialism coincide with the descriptions of cultural whiteness provided by participants.

In participant discussions, whiteness and white people were often described as racism/racist and white cultural imperialism. Although there is a distinction between white people and racism, whiteness, and consequently white people, are entwined with racism and undeniably connected to cultural imperialism. It is important to note that some of the descriptions of cultural whiteness by the participants came from direct experiences with white people and white institutions, others came from theoretical

understandings of racism and oppression (as evidenced by references to books or classes), some came from both.

One goal might be to find a way for mixed people to be able to acknowledge their whiteness without shame or disdain. One way to move towards this would be for white parents of mixed children to consciously learn about issues of racism and oppression. Many of these women had to deal with white parents and extended family members who made racist comments and/or ignorant comments around race issues. Thus, it is understandable that they would equate white people with racism and ignorance. Parents of mixed race children have a responsibility to strive to understand the unique racial positionalities their children possess. One way to do this is to listen to the stories of mixed race people.

It is clear from these women's stories that racism is enacted in cultural, social, and institutional levels. What is not clear is where these women fit in relationship to whiteness, racism, and white privilege. In the *Teaching for Diversity* book, white privilege is defined as,

The concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society which Whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society. Examples include the ability to be unaware of race, the ability to live and work among people of the same racial group as their own, the security of not being pulled over by the police for being a suspicious person, the expectation that they speak for themselves and not for their entire race, the ability to have a job hire or promotion attributed to their skills and background and not affirmative action (McIntosh, 1992) (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, & Love, 1997, pp. 97-98)

If I included only the first half of the definition above without the examples, one would say that almost all the participants have white privilege because thirteen of the sixteen participants were at times taken to be white, especially by white people. However, when

looking at the examples provided, there are several privileges listed to which none of the women have access. As we know from how these women identify, racial identification goes beyond skin color. Many of these women would admit that they might benefit from white privilege in certain situations, even those who don't pass as white because they have access to cultural whiteness. At the same time many of the women can provide examples of being denied access to many of the privileges afforded to whites. These women do not fit neatly into this model; oppression and privilege are more complex than the theory implies.

The same is true when looking at their experiences and stories in relationship to Lisa Delpit's (1995) theory of the culture of power as described in chapter 7; the participants' experiences do not fit neatly into Delpit's model. However, one of Delpit's claims that the women's stories echo is the responsibility white people have to listen to people of color if they want to promote equity.

As mentioned in chapter 7, this discrepancy between the participants' experiences and the social justice models raises several questions. When mixed race people are prejudiced against people of color, is that racism or internalized racism or do we need new terms? If at times we don't "get it;" if we are unable to see the operations of the culture of power, does that automatically make us white in that circumstance? If we examine our connection to whiteness, specifically our white privilege and the ways in which we are complicit in the culture of power, does that mean that we cannot be people of color? As mixed race women, we are caught in traps. To talk with white people about these issues makes us vulnerable to racism/prejudice but to talk to people of color makes us vulnerable to being alienated from a group of people to which we, at least in part,

identify. Not only do these models not fit our lives, they may be contributing to continued segregation. Many of the women kept the white people and the people of color in their lives quite separate. Thus although the women participated in border crossing, the politics of racism and the positionality of being in the middle contributed to wanting to keep the groups distanced.

### **Implications for Civil Rights Politics**

Despite the continuing divisions, the participants' stories do reflect a shift in larger racial politics. Williams (2006) in her research about multiracial movements and the effects on civil rights quoted African-American people expressing fear that, if given the chance, black people would disavow their blackness. The 2000 census results showed this not to be the case as identifications with non-white races increased. Similarly, these participants' stories demonstrate that there is a sentiment of wanting to claim and maintain their heritages of color. All of the women who talked about having kids explicitly stated that it was important to them that their children recognize their heritage of color. Their biggest fear was that their children would choose to identify as white. Thus in terms of destabilizing the perceived superiority whiteness, we have come a long way.

### **Implications for Theoretical Conceptions of Postcolonial Hybridity**

These women's stories are embodied voices of hybridity and mestizaje. The postcolonial conceptions of hybridity emphasize hybrid spaces and hybrid discourses as places of possibility that break down binary categories (Bhabha, 1996) and enable border crossing (Grossberg, 1993). Yet often postcolonial theorists discussing hybridity claim hybridity and hybrid spaces in abstract and theoretical ways (McLaren, 1997) that

obscure and omit the experiences of mixed race people, the embodied hybrid. These women's stories illuminate hybrid embodiment as places of possibility and agency; however, they also demonstrate personal costs and trauma. Hybridity is not only about the privilege of cross cultural relations but also about the ensuing pain caused by such relations. These women's stories of hybridity demonstrate border crossing and fluidity, but also alienation. Hybrid spaces are often places of possibility only insofar as there is acceptance and understanding by those in positions of power. These women told stories of experiencing oppression by white moms, for example, and white men who took advantage of their search for validation. Hybridity does not necessarily break down binary categories; these women, for example, had clear conceptions of whiteness defined *in contrast* to people of color, even as they embodied both identities simultaneously. Postcolonial conceptions of hybridity that are posed primarily as places of equity and possibility as described by theorists such as Bhabha, McLaren, and Grossberg deny the costs of living an embodied hybrid existence and minimize the potential trauma of hybrid existences. These women's stories paint a fuller picture of the benefits and costs to experiences of hybridity.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This work adds to the current research on multiracial issues and social justice. It complicates and illuminates issues of privilege and oppression. One of the most difficult aspects of qualitative research is deciding what to include and what to leave out. This project itself could be further theorized. Although at times I highlight intersectionalities of race, class, gender and/or sexuality, the work is theorized most heavily through a lens of race. This same work could be theorized with an emphasis on issues of gender and

with a sharper feminist lens. The stories could also be examined in relationship to queer theory.

There are also two major themes that could have been more prominently highlighted. There could easily have been a chapter titled, “Racism, Sexism, Classism, and Homophobia.” Those issues are woven throughout the chapters but they could be theorized more specifically in future research. The second theme is in related to issues of dating, mating, marriage, and kids. Perceptions and experiences with dating and marriage, and thoughts about having children are revealing in relation to ethics, values, and assumptions. Thus there are opportunities for further exploration even with the data gathered in this research project.

This work also points to further research that could be conducted related to mixed race issues. This work highlights experiences of middle class women. The breadth of this work could be expanded with the inclusion of experiences of poor/working class multiracial women and uneducated multiracial women. I was hoping that I would have a wider cross-section of participants in terms of socio-economic status. Not surprisingly, more middle-class women responded to my call for participants. Researching the experiences of working class mixed race women could contribute to theories of race and social justice and expand upon the findings of this project. Also, more research could be done with mixed race men to see how the experiences vary and to further tease out the intersectionality of race and gender. For educators, it might be beneficial to interview youth and/or to concentrate on schooling experiences, especially on interactions between teachers and mixed race students. There are also several questions raised here that lend themselves to further research. For example I wonder: What if whites are complicit in

“passing” so as not to have to deal with racial differences? It might be useful to conduct a study with white people and people of color about their perceptions of mixed race people.

## **Final Words**

Choosing final words is perhaps the most daunting chore in writing ethnography. In one of the group interviews I asked “What would you want to tell readers?” I also sent an email to all the participants several months after the interviews asking them to write a sentence or two in response to this question: “What do you want readers to take away from your stories?” This is what they said:

*Key aspects about being mixed race:*

- I consider every relationship to be an interracial relationship. (Joanna)
- Being mixed allows me to feel somewhat comfortable in many different settings but only partially comfortable. (Elizabeth, Susan)
- These are the stories of regular people forced to articulate deeply personal issues of identity without the guidance of mainstream culture--and more often, are compelled to do so because of it. (Mindy)
- These precious ideas we have yet to understand about ourselves--that are subject to the whims of the uninformed. How can we empower ourselves when we haven't learned the language of which to speak of it? (Mindy)
- Colorism, the one-drop rule---all the policies that sprung from Thomas Jefferson's original blood quantum formula, are all powerful ideas that have shaped our consciousness, our perception of ourselves and our place in this society. (Mindy)

- Mixed-race people aren't all troubled and confused. Being mixed race is a wonderful thing! (Elizabeth)
- I am constantly questioning my place in a world that doesn't know how to define mixed race people and my identity that shifts with almost each passing moment. (Janet)
- I experience and have internalized racism that has been mislabeled as white privilege. As such, I need to be trusted to know my truth. Do not tell my stories for me. (Maria)
- America should wake up to the accelerating colorization of the US and realize that mixed race people are the future of this country. We are not 'different.' Every family will have mixed race people in the not too distant future. (Diana)
- Being mixed is very difficult in a society/culture that does not have a complex notion of race, you are gray in a context where only black and white are seen to exist. But that is also the gift of being mixed, to be able to see the subtleties in all sorts of contexts, not just when thinking about race, where others can not. (Susan)

*Suggestions:*

- It's okay to have questions, but please be thoughtful of how you ask them and the tone you use. (Ruth)
- Don't assume that who I chose to partner with is a reflection of my self-identity. (Katherine)
- Read books about how white people benefit from white power, such as *White Like Me*. (Susan)
- To parents with mixed race children: Know that your children's experiences are very different from how you grew up. (Mindy)



- My mom has an incredible amount of white guilt as a result of watching the ways that I experienced institutionalized racism and white supremacy in almost every aspect of my life; sometimes subtly or other times overtly. Guilt is not helpful. It can even be destructive in interpersonal relationships. I would ask white parents with mixed kids to always try to understand and respect the difference in social location. I think this is a difficult task because it is challenging for parents (especially mothers) to see their children as separate from them. (Alana)
- Believe people when they tell you their story; truly listen. (Most participants)

The participants' statements above, about what they hope readers will take from their stories, reflect several of the themes I identified and many of the main points that I emphasize in this conclusion. If I had to identify one key idea I hope readers take from this work, it is the value and importance of listening to these women's embodied voices of hybridity. The participants' experiences are impacted by a variety of factors and their stories demonstrate both individual agency *and* outside imposed limitations on acceptance and mobility; as Susan says, "being mixed is both difficult *and* a gift." These stories span a continuum from alienation - as Mindy says, "how can we empower ourselves when we haven't learned the language of which to speak of it?" - to agency - as Elizabeth states, "being mixed is a wonderful thing!" This work provides new insights into the complexity of racism and white privilege. It inserts the embodied mixed race voice into hybridity discourses, and it raises questions that might help us think through how to further develop social, educational, and structural systems of equity. I hope that this work inspires others in their efforts and work to promote equity and social justice for all people.



## Are you a woman of mixed heritage?

biracial  
multiracial  
mestiza

mixed race

bicultural

mixed

multicultural



**Do you identify with ANY of the terms above?**



I am a doctoral student of mixed heritage collecting stories from other women who identify as mixed for a dissertation research project. You have a unique story to tell, and I want to hear your story. The goal of this project is to learn about the life histories of mixed race women who have one white parent and one parent who is a person of color (Latino/a, African-American, Native-American, Asian/Asian-American, etc.). I live in Durham, NC but will be doing interviews June-Sept 2006 in and around the following cities: Albuquerque, NM; San Francisco/Oakland, CA; and Boston, MA.

If you live in or near the cities listed above, and think you might be interested, call Silvia at 919-XXX-XXXX or e-mail [sbettez@email.unc.edu](mailto:sbettez@email.unc.edu) I can tell you more about the project and you can decide whether or not you want to participate.

## **Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about who you are.
2. Who do other people think you are?
3. Talk to me about your family.
4. Tell me about who you hang out with, describe your friends, partner, who you date...
5. How have your friends changed over time?
6. Are there groups of people that you feel more or less comfortable with? Tell me about that.
7. What was school like for you?
8. Tell me about what it means for you to be mixed race?
9. How do you think that others view you? (parents, friends, general public, teachers)
10. What is it like being mixed in this area and other places you have lived?
11. (At the end of the interview) Is there anything that you haven't said that you think would be helpful for me to know?

## **Appendix C: Individual Interview Consent Form**

**University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Adult Participants Individual Interview Form  
Social Behavioral Form**

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**IRB Study #** 06-0208  
**Consent Form Version Date:** 4-4-06

**Title of Study:** Mixed Race Women: Living on the Borders of Whiteness and Color

**Principal Investigator:** Silvia C. Bettez  
**UNC-Chapel Hill Department:** School of Education  
**UNC-Chapel Hill Phone number:** 919-962-2513  
**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. George Noblit

**Study Contact telephone number:** 919-824-8805  
**Study Contact email:** sbettez@email.unc.edu

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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

You are being asked to be in the study because you responded to a flier or email asking for interested participants. You are invited to participate in an individual interview as part of a research project being conducted by Silvia Bettez about the life histories of mixed race women. The information being collected in this project will be used for a doctoral dissertation for the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It is only in the past few decades that the voices of people of mixed heritage have been heard. Although there is a growing body of knowledge about a variety of ethnic/racial groups in the United States such as African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans, and Native-Americans, there is relatively little information about multiethnic/multiracial people. The goal of this project is to collect life stories of women who identify as mixed heritage, mixed race, and/or mixed ethnicity. This is an opportunity for you to share any stories you wish to tell about your life as a person of mixed heritage.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**

You should not be in this study if you do not view yourself as mixed race or mixed heritage. This study is meant for women who have one parent who is white and one parent who is a person of color. Although there are infinite possibilities of ways to be mixed heritage, if your background doesn't include both white people and people of color then your stories go beyond the scope of this project.

**How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 20 people in this research study. This study is being conducted with people in four different United States geographic areas. There will be approximately 5 people represented in each geographic area.

**How long will your part in this study last?**

You are asked to participate in at least two individual interviews as a participant in this study. Each interview will last no more than an hour and a half. If you have more stories to share after two individual interviews and/or if I have more questions to ask, you may participate in more interviews if you are willing. If you agree to participate in the study you will be giving at least three hours of your time to individual interviews. You will also be asked to participate in group interviews with other study participants. You are not required to participate in group interviews as a part of this study. If you want to do this, you will be asked to sign a separate group interview consent form.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you take part in this study you will be asked to participate in the follow actions:

- You will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will last 1 to 1.5 hours with Silvia Bettez. After the initial interview, you will be asked to participate in a second interview. After the second interview, you may be asked to participate in one or two more one-on-one interviews for a minimum of two individual interviews. Since the goal of this project is to hear the stories of the participants and each participant will have different stories to tell, the questions will be broad. For example you will be asked, "tell me about who you are" and "tell me what it means for you to be mixed." You can always choose not to answer a question.
- If you agree, the interviews will be audio-taped. You can ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time.
- You will be asked to provide any documents or pictures that might help explain who you are as a mixed race woman. What you choose to share is entirely up to

you. For example, you may want to bring in pictures of friends or family. If you have ever written anything relating to being mixed race you may want to bring those. Those documents will be reviewed by Silvia Bettez as part of the data for this study and returned to you within one month or whatever date that you request they be returned.

- You will be asked to participate in one or two group interviews with other participants for this study.
- The information gathered for this study is going to be used for a dissertation project.
- Your words may be quoted directly; however, any potentially identifying information, such as locations will be concealed or modified slightly (with your consent) to protect confidentiality.
- It is possible that some of the information used in this study will be used for publication. You will never be identified by name in any of the written materials (for more information on confidentiality see below).

### **What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. Since being mixed is not an easily identifiable category, it can sometimes feel isolating to be mixed. You may also expect to benefit by participating in this study by making connections with other mixed race women.

### **What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

There are no pre-identified risks to participating in the individual interviews of this study. However, if any risks arise as you participate, you should report any problems to the researcher.

### **How will your privacy be protected?**

Your confidentiality will be protected in a variety of ways.

- You will be given a pseudonym (fake name) and the pseudonym will be used in all the written notes and transcripts.
- All audiotapes, notes, transcripts, and documents will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- Data will be destroyed after a period of four years.
- Only the principal investigator, Silvia Bettez, and her advisor will have access to the data collected.
- Only pseudonyms will be used in any written and/or published material.
- All efforts will be made to conceal any potentially identifying information.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill

will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Although this form applies only to individual interviews, you will also be asked to participate in group interviews. If you agree to participate do so:

- You do not need to reveal your name and may use a fictitious name.
- You must agree not to reveal anything that you learn from group discussions or other activities.

If there is anything else that you desire to help maintain confidentiality that has not been listed, please advise the principal investigator, Silvia Bettez.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

The only possible cost that may be incurred during this study is transportation to interviews. However, the interviews can be conducted in a place that is convenient to you, including your home, so that you do not have to pay transportation costs.

**What if you are a UNC student?**

You may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your class standing or grades at UNC-Chapel Hill. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

**What if you are a UNC employee?**

Taking part in this research is not a part of your University duties, and refusing will not affect your job. You will not be offered or receive any special job-related consideration if you take part in this research.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB\_subjects@unc.edu.

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**Title of Study:** Mixed Race Women: Living on the Borders of Whiteness and Color

**Principal Investigator:** Silvia C. Bettez

**Participant's Agreement:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent



## **Appendix D: Group Consent Form**

**University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill  
Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Adult Participants Group Interview Form  
Social Behavioral Form**

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**IRB Study #** 06-0208

**Consent Form Version Date:** 4-4-06

**Title of Study:** Mixed Race Women: Living on the Borders of Whiteness and Color

**Principal Investigator:** Silvia C. Bettez

**UNC-Chapel Hill Department:** School of Education

**UNC-Chapel Hill Phone number:** 919-962-2513

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. George Noblit

**Study Contact telephone number:** 919-824-8805

**Study Contact email:** sbettez@email.unc.edu

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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

You are being asked to be in the study because you responded to a flier or email asking for interested participants. Since you have already agreed to participate in an individual interview, you are now being asked to participate in a group interview as an extension of your participation in the research project being conducted by Silvia Bettez about the life histories of mixed race women. The information being collected in this project will be used for a doctoral dissertation for the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Group interviews may provide a richness that can add to the information provided in the individual interviews. It may also help us to see what some of the shared experiences and differences are between women's experiences of being mixed race. This is an opportunity for you to share experiences with other mixed race women.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**

You should not be in this study if you do not view yourself as mixed race or mixed heritage. That does not mean that you have to identify by those terms specifically; however, this study is meant for women who have one parent who is white and one parent who is a person of color. Although there are infinite possibilities of ways to be mixed heritage, if your background doesn't include both white people and people of color then your stories go beyond the scope of this project.

**How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately 20 people in this research study. This study is being conducted with people in four different United States geographic areas. There will be approximately 5 people represented in each geographic area. It is expected that there will be approximately five people in each group interview.

**How long will your part in this study last?**

This consent form is asking for your participation in one or two group interviews. Each group interview should last no more than two hours.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you take part in this study you will be asked to participate in the follow actions:

- You will be asked to participate in 1 or 2 group interviews. Group interviews will be 1.5 to 2 hours long. These will be audiotaped if all participants consent to this. Group interviews will entail that you meet with other mixed race women in the area who are participating in this study and engage in a conversation with each other which will be facilitated by Silvia Bettez who will provide guiding questions.
- As you already know, there are also individual interviews involved in this study.
- The information gathered for this study is going to be used for a dissertation project.
- It is possible that some of the information used in this study will be used for publication. You will never be identified by name in any of the written materials (for more information on confidentiality see below).
- Your words may be quoted directly; however, any potentially identifying information, such as locations will be concealed or modified slightly (with your consent) to protect confidentiality.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. Since being mixed is not an easily identifiable category, it can sometimes feel isolating to be mixed. You may also expect to benefit by participating in this study by making connections with other

mixed race women.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

There are no more than minimal risks involved in this study. If you consent to a group interview, you will be sharing your story with other people. Each participant will be asked to commit to maintaining confidentiality. However, because we cannot guarantee the control of actions of study participants, and that no one will share your responses, we caution you to be as honest and open as you feel you can without taking any undue risk.

**How will your privacy be protected?**

Your confidentiality will be protected in a variety of ways.

- You will be given a pseudonym (fake name) and the pseudonym will be used in all the written notes and transcripts.
- All audiotapes, notes, transcripts, and documents will be kept in a locked cabinet.
- Data will be destroyed after a period of four years.
- Only the principal investigator, Silvia Bettez, and her advisor will have access to the data collected.
- Only pseudonyms will be used in any written and/or published material.
- All efforts will be made to conceal any potentially identifying information.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

In the group interview:

- You do not need to reveal your name; you may use a fictitious name.
- You must agree not to reveal anything that you learn from group discussions or other activities.

If there is anything else that you desire to help maintain confidentiality that has not been listed, please advise the principal investigator, Silvia Bettez.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

The only possible cost that may be incurred during this study is transportation to interviews. However, the interviews can be conducted in a place that is convenient to you, including your home, so that you do not have to pay transportation costs.

**What if you are a UNC student?**

You may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your class standing or grades at UNC-Chapel Hill. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

**What if you are a UNC employee?**

Taking part in this research is not a part of your University duties, and refusing will not affect your job. You will not be offered or receive any special job-related consideration if you take part in this research.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, or concerns, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to [IRB\\_subjects@unc.edu](mailto:IRB_subjects@unc.edu).

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**Title of Study:** Mixed Race Women: Living on the Borders of Whiteness and Color  
**Principal Investigator:** Silvia C. Bettez

**Participant's Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

### **Appendix E: Tentative Focus Group Questions**

1. Tell me what it's like to be a person of mixed heritage?
2. What are the ways that you identify yourself racially/ethnically? Does that change in different situations and/or has it changed over time? How so?
3. Talk to me about the benefits of being mixed.
4. Tell me about the challenges of being mixed.
5. Talk to me about how you navigate being with people of different cultures.

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