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Being Half Black

Navigating the Grey Space Between Races

Aimee Slatkavitz

Roger Williams University

Educational Studies Senior Thesis

Spring 2018

Many thanks to my thesis advisor Dr. Anne Winfield, for giving me the courage to use my own story for this thesis. Thank you also to the Roger Williams University School of Education for giving me the tools to compose this deeply personal piece.

I would also like to thank my parents, Robert and Antoinette Slatkavitz, for always pushing me to be the best I can be, and for knowing who I am, no matter what others may think. You two inspired this work, and continue to inspire me everyday. Much love.

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Subjectivity Statement

My first memory of race comes from when I was four years old. It is my earliest memory, and even so, it is racially charged. I was watching TV with my parents and when a commercial came on, it featured a family using whatever product was being advertised. Toothpaste, I think. They all looked so happy, and they absolutely would never use any other toothpaste to protect their family's teeth. All of them were white. I looked at my mother, who has skin the color of milk chocolate and said "Mummy, why don't you look like her?" My father, who is white, quickly shushed me and told me not to ask questions like that, but my mother took a couple of minutes to explain that many people have light skin and many people have dark skin, but what matters is how you act to others, not what you look like. It was a typical talk with a four-year old about "race."

I remember the stories my mother told me from her childhood as if she told me yesterday, as if I was there with her in Jamaica. In Jamaica, my grandmother worked in administration in the education system, and was highly regarded by the educators and families of students alike. My grandfather was a world renowned interior designer, and often flew to England and the United States to do work that he was commissioned for. In Jamaica, they had a live-in servant who cooked, cleaned, and helped the children get ready for school. But in 1976, when my mother was eleven years old, her father went on a business trip to Miami. She did not know at the time that he was not planning on returning to Jamaica, but instead, was looking for a place to relocate his family. A few months later, my mother and her mother and sister packed one suitcase each and collected \$5,000 from the bank—because nobody was allowed to leave the country with any more than that amount—and they told the guards at the airport that they were

going to Disney on family vacation. She has been back to Jamaica only two times since then. I've heard this story countless times, I know my mother and her family moved to America because Castro was trying to gain control of the Caribbean Islands, and multiple bomb threats at my mother's elementary school made it unsafe to attend. Even before moving to the U.S., my mother's family relocated within Jamaica because there were threats being sent to her parents saying the kids would be kidnapped for ransom. I know this story by heart, I can picture my mother telling me this story on multiple occasions. But it wasn't until I was 21 years old and a senior in college that I realized my mother and her family are refugees. I considered myself the daughter of an immigrant, but now I know I am the daughter of a refugee, forced to leave her country, her culture and her life behind to come to America in order to be safe.

Growing up, when my mother would take me in public, people would approach us and ask if my sister and I were adopted. We were not adopted. My mother carried me and my sister, and endured 36 hours of labor before being given an emergency c-section with me, and she won't let me forget it. Even at school, people would see my mom drop me off and ask "Are you sure you're not adopted? You really don't look like your mom." The answer always remained the same: "I'm sure I'm not adopted, but are you sure you're not adopted? You really don't look like your mom." I stopped bringing friends to my house, and would always visit them at their house because I was afraid for people to find out that my mother was black. It didn't help that people at school would make racist comments and I didn't have the courage to speak up when it was offensive to me. It didn't help that when I finally would tell someone that my mother is black, and that I am biracial, they would give me a quizzical look and then the way they treated me would change. It was always a subtle change, but people—especially those who had made

racist remarks in front of me prior to knowing my identity—would be careful around me, and I could tell.

Although I am fully aware that I have White Privilege, I have experienced racism first hand. Whether it's the time I went to the mall with my mother and we were followed in the store, or the times we've all gone to dinner as a family and the hostess assumes my mom isn't part of our party, or all the times we've gone into a hairdresser and they've turned us away because they can't "deal with ethnic hair," these experiences have told me that my identity doesn't exist.

I'm mixed, which in many states up until 1967 was not allowed¹. It was illegal for interracial couples to be married, and if you were more than 4% black, you were considered to be fully black. *Loving v. Virginia* was the Supreme Court ruling which which unanimously overturned *Pace v. Alabama* and ruled that state bans of interracial marriage were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Cline, 2017). Even so, I don't feel like I belong to either race, I live in a grey area that is impossible to navigate when there is nobody to talk to. I don't always feel comfortable around a group of all white people, because they do not recognize their privilege. I don't always feel comfortable in a group of all black people, because even though I have experienced racism, I still have the privilege of looking white, and I don't feel as though I am wanted as an ally. When I tell people I am half black, more often than not they jump a little, look surprised and then say "you're lying." And then I have to prove to them that my mother has brown skin by showing them a picture. People do not believe me when I tell them my own

¹ In 1958, Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming all still had anti-miscegenation laws (Oliver, 2012).

identity. When I tell them my experiences as a mixed race white girl, they do not believe me. And I do believe this has been detrimental to my own identity development. Why should I have to prove to you, a stranger, that I am what I say I am? If I told you I am a girl, would you say “prove it”? Just because this part of my identity isn’t readily visible to you as an onlooker, doesn’t mean you are privy to that information, to a photo of my mother just so you can wrap your small mind around how I could possibly have come from someone whose skin is darker than my own. And don’t tell me I don’t look like her. I have her eyes, and when we smile, our eyes light up the same way. I have the bridge of her nose, and the same jaw structure. I may not have her skin, but what’s it to you?

Growing up, my mother didn’t only tell me stories of her life in Jamaica. And not all of the stories I have from her were told to me directly. I remember overhearing my mother and her cousin, who was raised as her sister, talk about everything under the sun. Snide comments like “I don’t understand why black people act the way they do. I don’t act like that!” made me think that people had more of a choice on their social and economic status whether they were black or white. Thinking back on it now, I had a lot of internalized oppression towards black people. And I think my mother still does. I don’t think she realizes that as an immigrant from the Caribbean, she’s seen as hard-working, as a “model minority,” much like people of Asian decent. I don’t think she realizes that not having pride in her heritage, or knowing about the triangular trade routes that probably first brought her ancestors to Jamaica. She doesn’t call herself African-American, and was surprised and relatively angry to find out that she has West African roots. To me, this is problematic. We need to know about ourselves and our history and the systems of oppression which have instilled this deep-rooted oppression within ourselves.

Researching the theories surrounding the identity development of biracial individuals is my way of working through the experiences I have just told you all about, and doing this deeply personal work in an intentional and deliberate manner can help not only me but other people who identify as biracial—and their educators—to navigate the “grey space” that we all maneuver on a day-to-day basis.

Introduction

For most of my life, I have been navigating this society as a biracial individual, without much thought as to how being biracial has affected me. Within this “grey space,” so to speak, I have felt out of step with my monoracial peers, never fully fitting into the category of “White” or “Black.”

The experience of those who are biracial or multiracial is one that is often overlooked. Even though we have taken steps towards understanding and valuing ways of knowing that deviate from the White, Euro-centric model which has proven to be dominant in our culture, the overwhelming majority of classes focusing on ethnic studies—African Studies, Asian Studies, Latin Studies—all focus on monoracial groups, and deny the value of biracial thought. With the population of biracial and multiracial people growing exponentially—the United States Census Bureau projects that the number of people who identify themselves as two races or more will triple from 5.2 million to 16.2 million by mid-century (U.S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office, 2008)²—we need to take the time to understand how the biracial experience functions in our society.

In writing this project, I originally structured it much like a traditional research project, with sections broken into sections you would see in many research projects; Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and Conclusion. I have come to the point where in physically doing the research and writing the project itself, I do not want it to be structured in a traditional manner. I want this work to be accessible and engaging, so I have decided to structure

² United States Census Bureau. 2008. *American Community Survey*. p.6.

it much like a work of literature. Although it will still have properties of a qualitative research study, it will be broken into chapters. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011)³ ask in their article “Autoethnography: An Overview,” “what would social science be if it were closer to literature?” My answer to this question is this production. Representation, whether it occurs within the curriculum or within literature, is important to letting individuals know that their experiences are valid, so by examining my own ways of knowing, I am also representing biracial individuals in a work of writing which often is not included in mainstream thought.

³ Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., Bochner, A.P. (2011). *Autoethnography: An overview*. Forum: Qualitative social research: Volume 12, No. 1, Art. 10. Retrieved from: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>

Methodology

In this project, I will be utilizing the method of research known as Autoethnography. Autoethnography “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience,” (Ellis; Adams; Bochner, 2011). This is a method which is value-centered and focuses on stories rather than exclusively on theories in order to make research more accessible and closer to literature (Ellis; Adams; Bochner, 2011). By expanding the lens of traditional research practices, autoethnography validates multiple ways of knowing. According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), “those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upperclass, Christian, [and] able-bodied perspective.”

Within autoethnography, there are two sub-methods that need to be utilized in order to obtain a product which can truly be called “autoethnographic.” Autobiographical and Ethnographic research are commonly known in the realm of Qualitative research. Here I will explain what makes each method significant, and I will explore the elements of each method which I will be utilizing.

Autobiography

By “retroactively and selectively writing about experiences” and epiphanies (Ellis; Adams; Bochner, 2011)⁴, one can show how their own experiences align with phenomena experienced by others. Within the autobiographical section, I will be conducting a direct

⁴ Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., Bochner, A.P. (2011). *Autoethnography: An overview*. Forum: Qualitative social research: Volume 12, No. 1, Art. 10. Retrieved from: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>

autobiography. I have decided to engage in a direct autobiography, rather than an indirect biography—where I would tell someone else’s story—because indirect biographies can “hide other truths,” (Pinar, 2004)⁵. Since I myself identify as biracial, and I am examining the collective experience of the biracial student, I believe I am best equipped to do this work. Using my own experiences as opposed to exploring the experience of someone else can help me to fully engage in retroactive critical thinking in order to effectively digest and critically examine my own experiences. Although this section will not engage in Pinar’s method of *currere*—which seeks to examine “the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction,”—I will be utilizing two of the steps defined in his book “What is Curriculum Theory?” (Pinar, 2004). He lists the four steps of *currere* as “regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical,” (p. 35). Of those four steps, I am going to be actively engaging in both regressive and analytical within my autobiographical section.

Regressive

The first step in the method of *currere* is the “regressive” step. In this step, Pinar (2004) tells the person engaged in the practice of *currere* to focus on their lived experience as their “data source.” “To generate “data,”” Pinar (2004) says, “one free associates, after the psychoanalytic technique, to re-enter the past, and to thereby enlarge—and transform—one’s memory,” (p. 36). For me, this moment translated into my Subjectivity Statement, in which I share memories and anecdotes about my past experiences as a biracial individual. Exploring these experiences on paper was beneficial in helping me to create a proverbial “space” in which I could revisit and

⁵ Pinar, W.F. 2004. *What is curriculum theory?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Mahwah, NJ.

analyze my experiences in comparison to the research I have acquired on biracial identity development.

Analytical

In the analytical step, Pinar calls on the reader to examine the past and the present. “The analysis of currere is...one’s distantiating from past and future functions to create a subjective space of freedom in the present,” (Pinar, 2004, p. 36). The act of separating oneself from the past and the future can help to objectively look at how one has arrived at the present, and analyze the experiences in a space that is unbound by assumptions. As stated by Pinar, “the analytic phase is not self-scrutiny for the sake of public performance,” (p. 37) as the point of currere is to regulate and interpret signals sent and received to others, while also intensify the engagement with daily life (Pinar, 2004). For me, this analysis can help me to further understand other biracial students’ experiences by examining both my own daily experiences with race and the common experiences I share with others.

Ethnography

Ethnographic work is utilized by anthropologists to “study a culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences,” (Ellis; Adams; Bochner, 2011). I am specifically taking on the role of an anthropologist in analyzing the shared experiences of biracial individuals in our culture. Although ethnography is often used to examine the experiences of a cultural group, a subgroup of the culture may also be studied, according to Joseph Maxwell (2013). The researcher is to become part of the culture they are examining, which makes ethnography the perfect method for my project, being that I have lived as a member of this subgroup of our culture for the past twenty-one years. In ethnographic research, data collection

and analysis occur simultaneously, meaning that “as understanding of the data occurs, new questions emerge,” (Maxwell, p. 174)⁶.

Creswell (2007) states that oftentimes, this type of research involves people who interact over time, but I am instead examining how the subgroup (biracial individuals) interact with the broader culture, using my own experiences as a base for which I examine the phenomenon of biracial identity development.

The process of ethnography chooses one aspect of the culture being studied to examine and “involves extended observations of the group, most often thought participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people,” (Creswell, p. 68). Since my immersion has come from my own racial background, I have decided to explore the identity development of people who identify as biracial.

In writing an autoethnography, I am using my own experiences retrospectively, and using my epiphanies which have stemmed from being part of the society I live in. By analyzing my experiences and considering the experiences of other biracial individuals, I am systematically reflecting on my own knowledge, and the shared knowledge of other people who identify as biracial.

⁶ Maxwell, J.A. 2013. *Qualitative research design*. George Mason University, VA. Volume 41. Retrieved from: <http://health.prenhall.com/nieswiadomy/pdf/NIESWIADOMY10.pdf>

Ethnography

In this Chapter, I sought to display the theories which delve into the racial identity development of biracial individuals. I wanted to know, however, if biracial individuals' racial identity development had anything in common with the identity development of Black and White monoracial individuals. I found that the monoracial identity development models serve to situate a person within society, and demonstrate how one comes to see themselves as an individual with race. This in opposition to the biracial identity development models also discussed in this chapter, which position the biracial individual as seeking a racial category to fit into.

There are two main racial identity development theories in mainstream theoretical practices. But, are we failing those who do not identify as either White or People of Color by not including them in our mainstream thought of how racial identity develops? Of course, these theories center on race in the United States, and how racial identity occurs within the cultural confines of our society, as each of the theorists are from the United States and do research situated in how identities function in our society. The theories focus on how an individual's identity develops due to both internal and external factors, but how then, do people with ancestry rooted in each "opposite" identity—as seemingly posed here—develop racial identity?

Helms's White Racial Identity Development Model

Janet Helms (1990)⁷ identifies six stages—now referred to as statuses—which occur during the racial identity development of White folks. The reason for the name change from stages to status, as the reader will see, is because not every White person reaches the final status

⁷ Helms, J. E., ed. 1990. *Black and White racial identity: Theory, research and practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

of Autonomy. The six statuses are (1) Contact, (2) Disintegration, (3) Reintegration, (4) Pseudo-Independence, (5) Immersion/Emersion, and (6) Autonomy.

When falling into the status of *contact*, White people are oblivious to racism and have minimal experiences with Black people. This is often a time when White people will claim to be “color blind,” (Helms, 1995). Next is the *disintegration* status, which can be exemplified by a White parent who claims to hold no prejudices against minority groups, but does not want their child to marry someone who is not White. Another example of the disintegration status is not acknowledging the existence of oppression even while witnessing it (example: Black Lives Matter movement; White people saying “All Lives Matter”) (Helms, 1995). The third status of Helms’ White Racial Identity Model (1995) is *reintegration*, where the group the individual identifies with is idealized, and “racial/ethnic minorities are blamed for their own problems,” (Helms, 1995). The *pseudo-independence* status can begin to be entered when the White individual begins having more experiences with minority group members. However, this often occurs with minority individuals who are “similar” to themselves, and understanding race and privilege are seen as an intellectual exercise rather than an experiential act (Helms, 1995). In the *immersion/emersion* and autonomy statuses, there is a sense of viewing oneself as a racial being, and the White individual begins to understand the immense privilege they enjoy due to being White. Although “white guilt” is present in the immersion/emersion status, the feeling of guilt subsides in the *autonomy* status, where the White person feels the need to abandon White entitlement and understands the reality of race (Helms, 1995).

Cross's Black American Racial Identity Model

Although Cross did theorize and develop models centering around many minority groups, and not only Black Americans' racial identity development, I thought it pertinent to emphasize this model because this project centers around biracial identity development primarily in Black/White biracial individuals. Cross (1971)⁸ developed a racial identity development model which illustrates how Black individuals in America develop their racial identity in a culture which is so racially charged. There are five central stages in the development of a Black American racial identity according to Cross, which center around self-concept issues faced by Black Americans (Constantine, 1998)⁹.

The first stage of this model, the *pre-encounter* phase, states that (a) the individual has absorbed negative cultural beliefs of the dominant culture (including the notion that "white is right") and (b) that the individual is relatively unaware of race or racial implications (Cross, 1971). This stage is where we would likely see internalized oppression manifested in the attitudes of a Black individual in American society. The *encounter* phase is entered when the individual begins to understand the impact of racism in their own life, and when one focuses on their identity as part of a group which is targeted by racism (Cross, 1971).

In the immersion/emersion phase, unlike in Helms' (1995) model, where a White individual begins to realize their own privilege, a Black American will have the desire to

⁸ Cross, W.E., Jr. (1971). *The Negro-to-Black conversion experience: Toward a psychology of Black liberation*. *Black World*, 20, 13-27.

⁹ Constantine, M.G., Richardson, T.Q., Benjamin, E.M., Wilson, J.W. 1998. *An overview of black racial identity theories: Limitations and considerations for future theoretical conceptualizations*. *Applied & Preventative Psychology*. 7:95-99. Cambridge University Press. p. 96-97.

surround themselves with representations of their own racial identity. This is also a phase where one will begin to explore their own history and culture with the support of peers from the same racial background (Cross, 1971). This stage, I would like to argue, is when it is most important for Black students to see themselves reflected positively in the curriculum, so educators must ensure that their curriculum provides pathways for the growth of their students' racial identity development. Establishing concrete examples and providing role models who are within the same racial group can help students to move on to the next stage of their identity development, the *internalization* phase. This phase is where one becomes secure in their own sense of racial identity, and tends to become less defensive in their own "pro-black attitude," (Cross, 1971). The final phase of Cross' (1971) Black American Racial Identity Development Model is the *internalization-commitment* phase. This is shown when the person has found ways to formulate their own sense of blackness into action, and wishes to further engage in the improvement of the concerns of Black Americans as a group (Cross, 1971).

In examining my own experiences as a biracial student, I have found it of importance to explore how racial identity development occurs in biracial individuals in order to compare my own experience with the "shared experience" of biracial people. As we know, my own identity development had some bumps in the road due to external and internalized factors of oppression, and my family had large influences on my own identity development. So, I have decided to include models which explain (a) biracial identity development and (b) familial influences on biracial identity.

Biracial Identity Development

Garbarinin-Philippe (2010)¹⁰, argues that multiracial students in higher education are largely ignored, due to the assumption that multiracial people have an inability to fit into any monoracial group. Underrepresentation can also be seen in the curriculum at most institutions. When thinking of “ethnic studies” or “multicultural” classes, the curriculum is usually developed to reflect monoracial groups, and seldom show multiracial people at all. An American education “should teach us what it means to be American,” but when we leave certain groups out of the curriculum, the students who belong to these groups can end up feeling like outsiders (Kim, 2016)¹¹. This lack of representation can be detrimental to the identity development of biracial young adults.

There are two main theories which serve to illustrate the process of racial identity development in multiracial individuals; (1) Poston’s Five Stages of Development, and (2) Root’s Four General Resolutions of Biracial Identity.

Poston’s Five Stages of Development

Poston’s Five Stages of Development follow a linear progression of identity development within a biracial individual. Though individuals do not take the same amount of time in each

¹⁰ Garbarini-Philippe, R. (2010). *Perceptions, representation, and identity development multiracial students in american higher education*. New York University: Journal of Student Affairs, Vol. 6. Retrieved from: <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/lh62/Garbarini-PhilippeJoSA.pdf>

¹¹ Kim, A. 2016. *A culturally rich curriculum can improve minority student achievement*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from: <https://edexcellence.net/articles/a-culturally-rich-curriculum-can-improve-minority-student-achievement>

step, they go through each step in order, and do not deviate from the steps as laid out by Poston. These steps are (1) personal identity (sense of self independent of one's ethnic background), (2) choice of group characterization (choice of one's parent's racial heritage/multiethnic), (3) enmeshment/denial (confusion and guilt over an identity that does not fully express one's background), (4) appreciation (broadening of racial reference group), and (5) integration (recognition and appreciation of one's multiple identities) (Garbarini-Philippe, 2010).

Personal identity would most commonly be experienced during childhood, when the child is not aware of their mixed heritage in a conscious manner. This however, leads to the *choice of group characterization* stage, where the child will feel familial, community or peer pressures to choose one racial group over the other, and to identify as monoracial. When the individual feels guilty for choosing one racial group over the other, the *enmeshment/denial* phase begins. The individual then begins to deny the differences between racial groups and instead chooses to identify with both. The fourth stage of this identity development model is the *appreciation* stage, where the biracial individual begins to feel they can identify with both racial groups, and appreciates their biracial identity by beginning to explore the group they do not largely identify with. Lastly, in the *integration* phase, the individual may still only identify with one group, but can appreciate and wholly develop “the integration of their multiple identities,” (Milville, 2006, p.77)¹².

Root's Four General Resolutions of Biracial Identity

¹² Milville M. Biracial identity. Jackson Y, editor. *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology*, First Edition. 2006 Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc. 77–78

Root's Four General Resolutions of Biracial Identity are not as rigid as Poston's linear development theory. There is a relative fluidity implied in her theory of racial identity development for biracial individuals (Kleinmann-Fleischer, 2015)¹³. Though she provides four resolutions, she states that biracial individuals do not need to pass through all resolutions in order to develop their biracial identity, and they may pass through one multiple times, or go back and forth between all four (Root, 1996)¹⁴.

The four resolutions are (1) acceptance, (2) identification with both racial groups, (3) identification with a single racial group, and (4) identification as a new racial group.

The *acceptance* of the identity society assigns may be based on the appearance of the individual, and does not relate to the inner identification of the person. This is how society views you, and has nothing to do with how you wish to be labeled, but entirely how people within society wish to view you.

Being able to *identify with both racial groups* occurs when the individual "feels equally accepted when with both races," (Root, 1996). According to Kleinmann-Fleischer (2015), in this stage the individual may need to come up with strategies to cope with society's resistance to their claiming equal membership in both racial categories. Historically, research surrounding biracial individuals has posited them as identifying solely with the racial category of their minority parent (Kteily, 2017)¹⁵.

¹³ Kleinman-Fleischer, B. (2015). *Biracial/multiracial identity development*. Retrieved from: https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-0-387-71799-9_45

¹⁴ Root, M., (2003). *The multiracial child resource book*. Seattle, WA: Mavin Foundation.

¹⁵ Ho, A.K.; Kteily, N. & Chen, J.M. 2017. *How are black-white biracial people perceived in terms of race?* Kellogg Insight. Retrieved from: <https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/how-are-black-white-biracial-people-are-perceived-in-terms-of-race>

Identification with a single racial group occurs on an individual basis, and is not based on society or the appearance of the biracial individual, but on which group they feel expresses them better.

The last resolution created by Root is the *identification as a new racial group*. When a biracial person feels most connected to other biracial individuals, rather than feeling connected to those who identify as either race categories they fit in to, this is the resolution they would fit in to. Rather than feeling pressured by society's need to categorize people by racial markers, biracial individuals who fit into this resolution have risen to a point where they enact their own differences and create a new racial group founded on the similarities of biracial individuals.

As previously stated, these four resolutions are not interdependent, but are entirely independent of one another. The biracial person who experiences these resolutions may not be doing so consciously, but Root states that all biracial identity development will fall into one of these four resolution categories (1996). Root focuses on identity development not as reaching an endpoint, but finding a healthy way to identify and exist as biracial in our society. Renn (2003) however, notes this unique developmental attribute of a biracial individual as:

Being able to hold and merge multiple perspectives simultaneously; situational ethnicity and race, or consciously shifting racial foregrounds and backgrounds in different settings; a decision to sit on the border, claiming a multiracial central reference point; and creating a home base in one identity and making forays into others. (p. 384)

This important distinction proves the theory of situational identity, where students may identify differently based on the sociocultural context they are in. Having the ability to navigate our

society by moving through their multiple identities is essential in maintaining the “resilience developed by confronting society’s pressure to choose on e racial group,” (Garbarini-Philippe, 2009).

The resilience developed through identifying as biracial has also been cited by Greig (2013)¹⁶. Greig’s *Seven Essential Facts About Multiracial Youth* goes one step further by identifying ways in which biracial individuals also experience unique types of discrimination and microaggressions. The exclusion from each monoracial group that a biracial person identifies with can be traced back to the often-seen assumption of a monoracial identity. People are quick to assume that a person identifies as whatever race they appear to be, and expect people with more ambiguous backgrounds or appearances to explain what they “are.” One example, given by Greig (2013) is the biracial child who presents as white being told a joke about black Americans, and being offended, but not knowing what to do. Discrimination on an institutional scale can also be seen in schools and private and public spheres when biracial people are told to only choose one racial category on demographic information forms, giving them a “lack of control in being able to properly self-identify,” (Greig, 2013).

Although there is an ambiguous quality to biracial people—I refer to this ambiguity as a “grey space”—being able to situationally shift between racial groups can develop a strong resilience to societal pressures to identify solely as one race.

¹⁶ Greig, A. (2013). *Seven essential facts about multiracial youth*. CYF News: American Psychological Association. Retrieved from: <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2013/08/multiracial-youth.aspx>

Familial Influences in Biracial Identity Development

Within multiracial families constructed of parents who come from a privileged and a marginalized background, each parent “bring[s] distinct racial experiences and racial identities,” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013)¹⁷. In monoracial families, White parents are more likely to teach their children about equality when asked about race, whereas Black parents are more likely to emphasize racial differences and proactively teach and prepare their children for bias (Katz & Kofkin, 1997)¹⁸. This does not effectively apply to interracial marriages with biracial children.

A study focused on the racial socialization of biracial youth through the familial context of how mothers specifically influence their children’s identity development states there are three general approaches taken to socialize children racially (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). According to Rollins and Hunter, the three approaches are (1) promotive, (2) protective and (3) passive racial socialization.

1. A promotive racial socialization approach “focuses on strengthening the child’s sense of self...and passing on cultural traditions and values,” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). There is no direct preparation on how to deal with discrimination, and often encourages a color-blind world view

2. A protective racial socialization approach “focuses on preparing children for experiences with racial discrimination...and strengthening their child’s sense of self as a member

¹⁷ Rollins, A., & Hunter, A.G. (2013). *Racial socialization of biracial youth: Maternal messages and approaches to address discrimination*. *Family Relations*, 62, 140-153. Retrieved from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00748.x/full>

¹⁸ Katz, P. A., & Kofkin, J. A. (1997). *Race, gender, and young children*. In S. S. Luthar, J. A. Burack, D. Cicchetti, & J. R. Weisz (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Perspectives on adjustment, risk, and disorder* (pp. 51–74). New York: Cambridge University Press.

of a racial group,” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). Although mothers who fall into this category do teach their children that all people should be treated equally, but also equip their children with explicit tools to combat any discrimination they encounter.

3. A passive racial socialization approach “indicated they did nothing to prepare their children for discriminatory experiences or did not answer the question,” (Rollins & Hunter, 2013).

Crawford and Alaggia (2008)¹⁹ found that the “level of parental awareness and understanding of race issues” did have an impact on how they socialized their children. In one other study conducted by Gibbs and Hines (1992)²⁰, they examine families who are in search of a more inclusive term to describe a biracial identity. The researchers ask whether finding a “more inclusive label to reflect a dual racial heritage could perhaps be interpreted as an underlying ambivalence toward a Black identity in a predominantly White society, or as a positive affirmation of racial duality,” (Gibbs & Hines, 1992). This notion of an inclusive identifier “writing off” the Black identity of a biracial person is interesting, due to the overwhelming stratification seen in our society. Social stratification, the process of assigning unequal value to

¹⁹ Crawford, S.E., & Alaggia, R. (2008). *The best of both worlds?: Family influences on mixed race youth identity development*. *Qualitative Social Work*, 7, 81-98. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249675227_The_Best_of_Both_Worlds_Family_Influences_on_Mixed_Race_Youth_Identity_Development

²⁰ Gibbs, J.T., & Hines, A.M. (1992). *Negotiating ethnic identity: Issues for black-white adolescents*. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232593472_Negotiating_ethnic_identity_Issues_for_Black-White_adolescents

different groups, allows dominant groups to have more access to opportunities than minoritized groups (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012)²¹. Assigning more value to a biracial person's dominant identity (White, European), would follow this stratification, if the inclusive term developed focused more on the White than the Black.

²¹ DiAngelo R., Sensoy, O. (2012). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York, NY.

How do I Compare?

After conducting my research on how racial identity development is thought to occur, I thought it would be pertinent to identify which aspects of the aforementioned theories connect to my experience as a biracial individual. My racial identity is still a work in progress, but being able to retroactively analyze my experience in conjunction with the theories identified in my Ethnography chapter has been beneficial to the process of finding my place within the “grey space” of being biracial.

Poston’s Five Stages

Poston’s Five Stages of Biracial Identity Development are staged in a linear manner. As I previously stated, the *personal identity* phase is most often experienced in childhood. When I was young, I didn’t think anything of the fact that my mother was Black and my father was White, and as I said, I first realized my family wasn't like other families when I saw an all-White family in a commercial. My own personal identity had nothing to do with the color of my skin until I was questioned about it in school, but up until then, I always just knew that I was “mixed.”

This leads me to my own entrance into the *choice of group characterization* stage. My mother was the only person who called my sister and I “mixed” when we were little. I was often pushed to identify as White by people outside of my family. For example, on the school enrollment forms my mother had to fill out, she would select Black because she wanted us to be able to show all aspects of our identity in school (the White skin plainly proved that aspect of our identity, so this was her way of ensuring our heritage was shown). When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) came to my school and pulled all

of the children who were identified as “Black” on their enrollment forms, I was scolded for putting “false information” on the enrollment form. Of course, this angered my mother, and we were later sat down with the NAACP representatives so they could apologize to my mother and I for their gross miscalculation in attempting to identify me based on my appearance. Later, when applying to colleges and finally settling on Roger Williams University as my home for four years, I decided to select both Black and White on my own enrollment form, and suddenly a flood of emails about the Intercultural Center and Multicultural Student Union entered my email inbox. I was promised a “Diversity Leader,” or a mentor who also has a minoritized background who could help me in addition to the Peer Mentor, which every incoming student is assigned. When I asked to meet my Diversity Leader upon arrival on campus on move in day, I was swiftly shooed away, and was told that I didn’t need one.

Even though I have actively chosen to characterize myself as mixed, my outward appearance is how people chose to identify me, and promptly decided that I was not in need of any assistance when it came to transitioning into college life. In beginning to understand that people saw me as a monoracial White young woman, I began to classify myself as such, which made me enter the *enmeshment/denial* stage.

I began feeling guilty for denying the Black half of my heritage long before college. I realized in eighth grade that I had begun to feel ashamed of my mother, and I stopped inviting my friends over. At this point, I didn’t even want my mom to go to school because I was afraid of what people would think when they met my Black mother. It pains me to rethink the times when I was not proud to be mixed, and instead chose to hide that facet of my identity, but then I think about when I began to take pride in my identity.

I believe I entered the *appreciation* stage when I entered high school, because I had the opportunity to not only attend my predominantly White public high school in my town, but was able to attend the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts (GHAA). GHAA has a richly diverse student and teacher population. MY teachers were strong, intelligent, and independent Black women, and gave me examples of other mixed individuals, which I had not been exposed to in the past. Before GHAA, the only Black people I knew were the people on my mother's side of the family, and the Black people I learned about were to be pitied, because they somehow fell into the trap of slavery. I believe that this is when I entered the *integration* stage.

Once I had the role models and personal knowledge of people who were like me—people who were biracial—I could fully understand and appreciate how each of my parents' identities intertwined to create me. I could appreciate the struggles that my mother has endured as a Black woman in America, but can also understand that there is more to me than the color of my skin and the opportunities that it undoubtedly supplies.

Root's Four General Resolutions

As stated by Root (1996), a biracial identity may not develop in a linear manner—thus contributing to the fluidity of a biracial identity noted by Renn (2003)—and each individual may progress through the four resolutions in a uniquely individualized manner. I believe that I have only passed through two of the four resolutions; *acceptance* and *identification as a new racial group*. I say this because although I can identify with both racial groups as Root suggests some biracial individuals have the ability to do, I can relate to other biracial individuals much more effectively and comfortably.

I do not feel as though I can fully fit in with groups of White people because I recognize my own privilege as a person with light skin, and I have experienced racism first-hand.

Oftentimes, the only White people I can truly connect with are those who have reached the *autonomy* stage of Helms' White Racial Identity Development Model (1990). In this stage, the White individual fully understands the implications of race and how their whiteness provides societal entitlements that come with being White. Since I have had experiences where I have been faced with microaggressions and overt forms of racism, I have been able to reach the autonomy stage of the White development.

That being said, I have also passed through Root's (1996) *acceptance* resolution because I have wholly accepted the fact that the world sees me as my skin color—as White—instead of how I identify myself. I do not owe the world an explanation as to why I identify as biracial, so I allow people to draw their own conclusions on the matter.

My experiences have helped me develop the resilience cited by Garbarini-Philippe (2009), and I have been able to better navigate the pressures of society to choose one racial group over the other for the sake of being categorized to make other people's lives easier. Institutionalized microaggressions have also been prevalent in my life. I am often only able to select one race on application forms or data forms for school or work. This presents me with an internal conflict; which half of my identity do I erase? Do I check the "White" box and erase my mother and her story, or do I check "Black" and deny the fact that I benefit from appearing White? Being able to navigate these pressures and choose a race without feeling guilty means that I have accepted the societal identification given to me, even though I have chosen not to identify as what society wants me to be.

As I come to the conclusion of this momentous culmination of my undergraduate experience, I feel as though the process of writing this thesis has been entirely transformative for my own identity. Having the opportunity to rethink experiences in a critical manner and compare them with theories which aim to explain the racial identity development of biracial individuals has been nothing short of inspirational for me. Knowing that my experiences can be deemed valid not only by peers who share similar racial backgrounds to myself, but also can be backed with research is fulfilling. Using retroactive self examination techniques has been exhausting but should be conducted by every student in regard to their own experiences.

Thank you for allowing me to share my stories with you.