MORALLY FRAUGHT IDENTITIES:
HOW MULTIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS NAVIGATE RACE AND WHITENESS

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Acknowledgements

What a nightmare it has been to write a dissertation during the past few years. There is a tendency to gloss over hardships once some big work has been accomplished, to focus on more satisfying messages of resiliency and strength. To do so at this moment would feel like a disservice and a betrayal, both to myself and those I will be thanking here shortly. Bear with me.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. during the second year of my PhD program. From that point, we seemed to face one crisis after another in rapid succession. During this time of sudden, forced isolation, we increasingly sought connection online. Then, the U.S. was shaken by the viral police murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. In my capacity as a race researcher and staff at the Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society (CRRES), we mobilized quickly, hosting a webinar series that same summer and fielding a sudden widespread interest in understanding race and racism. Like many, I attended protests, posted and reposted educational resources online, and watched horrified as another crisis arose in the form of anti-Asian sentiment and violence, spurred by misinformation on COVID-19. Compared to the sudden punctures of violence that were police murders of Black and Brown individuals, anti-Asian violence seemed to swell gradually, snowballing until the pattern was undeniable, the same old racist histories repeating. In calls home, I warned my mother to be careful. On my pandemic walks, I began to think of my slim metal water bottle as a potential weapon. I finished my graduate classes, qualifying exams, taught my own college courses, published articles, and completed my dissertation proposal in spite of these "unprecedented" events.

I began conducting interviews for my dissertation shortly after the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, in which the shooter killed eight people, including six Asian women, in a rampage

intended to eliminate women he viewed as sexual temptations. In 2023, Bloomington experienced its own moment of clear anti-Asian violence, a brutal bus stabbing in which the perpetrator stabbed an IU student multiple times in the head, describing her motivation as having "one less person to blow up our country." I spoke with my interviewees about these moments, sometimes after recordings were turned off, person-to-person, rather than as researcher and participant. These experiences shaped their lives, which in turn shaped my dissertation research, but I hope our conversations provided moments of catharsis and connection too.

However, since the "racial reckoning" of 2020 and widespread recognition of anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism, we've experienced a national backlash. These periods are not so cleanly delineated; White supremacist activity had been building all along. Between Zoom meetings, I watched coverage of the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol, in which White supremacist groups and their supporters were emboldened to violently contest the results of the 2020 presidential election. We soon saw growing movements to twist and target "CRT," and later "DEI," in the form of book bans and calls for increased surveillance and control of K-12 and higher education. These moments affirmed a pressing need for research on race and racism, and a reminder that resistance to these topics remained alive and well.

Finally, October 2023 marked the start of a new horror: the on-going, live-streamed genocide in Gaza. Scrolling through increasingly horrifying deaths occupied the moments between my dissertation writing and job applications. Local protests and vigils took place in fits and starts, until Columbia University students organized the first encampment protest on April 17, 2024, demanding their university divest from companies arming Israel. IU Bloomington's encampment began the next week, on April 25, 2024. IU administration responded with a last minute policy change the night before, which they used to justify a swift and violent suppression

of free speech. University and state police arrested several protestors, including brave, dear friends, and tore down the encampment. I could not write during these unprecedented events. Organizers reestablished the Dunn Meadow encampment the next day. President Pamela Whitten and her administration established a sniper at the top of the Indiana Memorial Union building in response. She called the Indiana State Police again on April 27th, conducting another round of arrests that targeted protestors seen as movement leaders and trashing the encampment. Again, we returned and rebuilt.

On May 4, 2024, while others protested President Whitten's policies at the IU graduate commencement ceremony, we held a "People's University" graduation in Dunn Meadow. Borrowed robes, a collaborative handprint banner, and new plants gifted to newly minted B.As., M.As., and Ph.Ds. characterized the ceremony. I was proud to witness one of our Sociology majors in his cap and gown, boldly giving a speech about standing up for what is right, calling for graduates not to lose sight of what they had stood for here. Overhead, in a bright blue sky, an airplane banner flew the Palestinian flag, followed by the words "Let Gaza Live!" I began to write again after the People's University graduation, though the encampment persisted into the summer, a small but mighty group persevering for 100 days.

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"A good graduate student should be so focused on their research that World War III could break out and they wouldn't know." A good undergraduate mentor shared this sentiment with me while I was applying to graduate school, not as a directive, but a reflection on what his advisor had told him. Perhaps, implicitly, this was a warning about what might be expected of me. That I might be entering an environment in which work was expected to supersede all else.

I have been fortunate to have mentors who have not expected me to suppress my humanity in favor of work. I am immensely grateful to those who advised me through so many "unprecedented" events, who provided a listening ear, a resource, and moments of shared humanity. Thank you to Dina Okamoto, Jessica Calarco, Jennifer C. Lee, Hyeyoung Kwon, and Sylvia Martinez for your support over the years.

Dina Okamoto was instrumental in my decision to attend IU. I likely would not have chosen to come to IU without her; I am not sure how I would have stayed without her either. In my first few years, Dina was a powerful source of support, encouragement, and guidance. As I gradually realized how little I understood about academia, our conversations helped me work through ideas, learn how to make sociological contributions with my research, and communicated that I could belong here too. She wrote me countless recommendation letters for fellowships, grants, and jobs, and helped me navigate many parts of academia that felt utterly foreign. And I am especially grateful to her for bringing me into the CRRES community, a space that became my workplace, a network of scholars and students, and a refuge that affirmed, again and again, that race and ethnicity research on campus is necessary, rigorous, and supported.

Jessica Calarco played a formative role in my PhD education from the start. She was my Sociological Research Practicum (SRP) professor, which meant that I was fortunate to get hands-on research experience with her in my first summer. I learned so much from Jess, from honing my interviewing skills, to research design, to strategies for navigating graduate school and the "hidden curriculum." Her clear instruction, whether in one-on-one meetings, classes, or blog posts and books, remained important resources as I reached various milestones. Her written feedback is unparalleled. Finally, I would have had a much more difficult time without her kind mentorship. I could count on Jess to always check in with me before diving into our meeting

agenda, to share an exasperated look or cynical laugh about the state of the world, or sit with a heavy moment. I'll never quite know how she does it all, but Jess is an incredible role model.

My appreciation for Jennifer C. Lee has grown exponentially over the years. In her role as Director of Graduate Studies, she was my first point of contact with IU Sociology. I likely projected many of my frustrations with the program onto her in that first year. But somewhere along the way, Jennifer became one of my best mentors and favorite people. She was consistently supportive of my research on multiraciality, which meant the world to me in the moments when I was unsure that this work was valued. She taught me to think in more critical, pragmatic, and rigorous ways, particularly as the chair of my qualifying exams. Her level of dedicated mentorship helped shape the way I think, research, and teach. Jennifer's working group kept me accountable during that long unstructured stretch at the end of grad school, helped me maintain connections with students across cohorts, and is a model for how I would approach working my own graduate students. I am particularly grateful for her support through difficult moments and on the job market.

Hyeyoung Kwon was my assigned first-year mentor, and her race and ethnicity class was my first TA assignment. I had no idea how fortunate I was to meet and work with her so early on. I quickly learned that Hyeyoung is a brilliant researcher, powerful writer, and dedicated mentor. I experienced a kind of culture shock at IU, Indiana, and academia, but our conversations were validating and affirming, striking a balance between acknowledging the unequal practices we have yet to resolve in academia and strategizing ways to get through. Hyeyoung's feedback on my ideas, from research design to theoretical contributions, was rigorous and thorough, but kind. I am consistently impressed by and appreciative of the ways she

deftly connects literatures, theories, and builds complex and nuanced arguments. Hyeyoung is a model for the type of scholar I hope to be, in more ways than one.

Sylvia Martinez joined my committee just last year, but I was excited about her research before then. Before Sylvia, I didn't know anyone else at IU who was studying multiraciality. Learning about her work on multiracial Latinos in education was exciting and encouraging, particularly with so much of the literature still focused on only Black-White biracial experiences. Her feedback came from an informed place, as someone working with populations overlapping with my own research. I also appreciated working with Sylvia in her capacity as CRRES Director, first during a transitional year in 2022-23, and again in my final year in 2024-25. Sylvia has been a clear, kind, and attentive leader, and I have been fortunate to work with her.

I am grateful to many other faculty who have supported me along the way: Peggy Thoits, with whom I still associate with the overwhelming excitement I felt sitting in my first graduate class; Koji Chavez, who arrived at IU the same year I did and felt like a faculty member of my cohort; Patricia McManus, who was terrifying in stats, but supportive, gave thorough feedback, and could always keep up a good banter; Brian Powell, who guided me through S700 and provided feedback instrumental to my first full-length publication; and others, including: Pamela Braboy Jackson, Fabio Rojas, and Emily Meanwell. Many outside of the Sociology department also supported me and shaped my scholarship and graduate school experience, whether they knew it or not: Michelle Moyd, Maria Hamilton Abegunde, Kakali Bhattacharya, Ellen Wu, Melanie Castillo-Cullather, Dorainne Green, Vanessa Cruz-Nichols, Tenisha Riley, Candice Miller, Chinbo Chong, Christine Peralta, Juan Mora, Vivek Vellanki, Aleshia Barajas, Olivia Ekeh, Carolina Ortega, Lucía Stavig, Mariana Stavig, Max Jack, Kathy Darragh, Ramón Resendiz, and Korinthia Nicolai.

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Thank you to my family, who were supportive even when they didn't quite understand what I was doing in school for so long and provided many much-needed breaks away from academia.

Thank you to my University of Denver Sociology professors, who left such a lasting impact that I decided to pursue a Ph.D.: Hava Gordon, whose Social Movements class convinced me to stick with Sociology; Paul Colomy, advisor and teacher extraordinaire; Jennifer Reich, honors thesis professor and mentor; and last but not least, Lisa Martinez, collaborator and source of support throughout graduate school.

Finally, the biggest thank you to my participants, some of whom wondered how long this thing was going to take and was shocked that it would be years. Without you, this work couldn't exist. Even in a document this long, I can only cover a fraction of your experiences, but I hope I do them justice. Many of our interviews touched on the idea that multiracial identity is something we shouldn't make a big fuss about. That talking too much about multiraciality is

frowned upon, embarrassing, and/or takes away from the experiences of monoracial groups of color. For some of you, a focus on monoracial identities has worked out fine. But my hope for this research is that it contributes to a growing body of research and public conversations that recognize the uniqueness and importance of your multiracial stories and experiences. Your experiences can teach others things that might seem completely obvious to you, and connecting the threads across all your experiences might reveal something new to all of us about how we survive together in this multiracial democracy. Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

Monica Heilman

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Multiracial identities and experiences cannot be fully understood through monoracial categories, yet multiracial individuals must contend with monoracial structures. Through 55 in-depth interviews and photo elicitation with multiracial young adults (18-24) in the Midwest, I examine how multiracial individuals navigate and contend with race, racism, and identity in the context of Whiteness, family, and education. First, I find that multiracial individuals who can be seen as White, at least some of the time, experience Whiteness as a wage (benefit) that is tempered in part by a "tax" on the benefits of Whiteness. This tax stems in part from experiences of Whiteness as a "contingent status," in which interpretation as White by others is not a guarantee. Second, I examine bidirectional ethnic-racial socialization within multiracial families to show that children engage in the socialization of their parents around matters related to race and racism. In particular, children drew on knowledge of social movements like Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate, exercising agency, conducting hidden labor, and operating as one potential force for generational social change. Third, I analyzed experiences with racial socialization and racialization within school settings, finding that multiracial students contend with a contradiction: schools routinely dismiss race and racism as legitimate topics of study, yet it is within schools that multiracial students are starkly racialized. Multiracial students respond to a lack of instruction on race and racist interactions with peers by conducting their "own research" with respect to racial identity, drawing moral boundaries as they develop racial and political consciousness. In each of these social realms (experiences with Whiteness, family, and education), multiracial individuals navigate race and racism on monoracial terms. This study

suggests the need for a "multiracial paradigm" of race, which can account for the totality of multiracial experiences with race and multiraciality.

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Introduction

At the 2024 National Association of Black Journalists conference, then presidential candidate Donald Trump sparked controversy for his remarks on Vice President Kamala Harris's racial ancestry. "I didn't know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black, and now, she wants to be known as Black," he said. "So, I don't know, is she Indian or is she Black?" (El-Bawab 2024). On the surface, his remarks seem to reflect a simple ignorance of multiracial existence. Going deeper, and considering the context of this particular conference and his election campaign, Trump draws on long-standing tropes of multiracial people as confused to question the legitimacy and authenticity of Harris's Blackness in front of an audience of potential Black voters. In the court of public opinion, this attack strategy failed, as audience members at the event jeered and groaned at his remarks, which then went viral online, were subject to further ridicule, and became political ammunition for the Harris campaign.

Beyond this individual event, Trump's comments can be read as the flailing attempts of a monoracial system to make sense of multiracial people with an insufficient framework. Multiracial identities and experiences, ultimately, cannot be fully understood through monoracial categories. But multiracial individuals must contend with monoracial structures. These moments of navigation and contention, with respect to Whiteness, families, and education, are the basis of this dissertation.

Defining and Measuring Multiraciality

The multiracial population is growing rapidly, and how they identify and experience race has meaningful implications for the U.S. racial structure. Between 2010 and 2020, the U.S. multiracial population increased by 276 percent, now comprising at least 33.8 million people or 10.2 percent of the U.S. population (Jones et al. 2021). Researchers have noted that this change

has been driven by both natural growth and changes to data processing at the U.S. Census, particularly for the Hispanic category (Ventura and Flores 2025). Atkin and Minniear (2023) draw on quantitative and qualitative survey data to reveal that multiracial emerging adults (ages 18 to 29) report that their Census race responses were motivated by identity (42%), accuracy (23.1%), and external factors (18.2%), with the latter referring to circumstances such as following family members' instructions on how to mark race or relying on how others perceive them, irrespective of personal identification. Those motivated by accuracy were also more likely to report higher levels of shifting racial expressions compared to identity-driven or externally driven participants, suggesting that this group is more likely to shift their choices based on available survey categories. The multiracial population is undoubtedly growing, but measurement is complex and remains uneven, suggesting that U.S. racial classification is still limited by its adherence to a monoracial paradigm.

Scholars have yet to establish a single agreed-upon definition of who counts as multiracial (Song 2021), as definitions and commonplace understandings vary by country (Daniel 2022) and are shaped by shifting legal restrictions and state classifications (O'Connell, Bratter, and Casarez 2022). There are also questions around the cut-off for one's "generational locus of multiraciality," or how far back in one's genealogical ancestry racial mixing should have taken place to still be considered multiracial today, a measure that is complicated by various contexts and histories of individual racial groups (Bratter 2007; Morning and Saperstein 2018). Multiracial self-identification is also shaped by the way race is measured, such as the categories available on survey questions about race (as demonstrated by the U.S. Census discussion above). Similarly, how multiracial individuals identify and experience race varies considerably, based on a wide array of factors, suggesting that sweeping arguments about large swaths of the population,

such as the idea that multiracials are becoming White, are difficult to support. For this study, I define "multiracial" as individuals with parents of two or more racial ancestries, adhering to Morning's (2014) specification that these ancestries are "currently believed to constitute distinct races" (10).

Multiraciality and Whiteness

Considerations of how multiracial individuals engage with and navigate Whiteness form the foundation of this dissertation, supplemented by additional examination into ethnic-racial socialization and racialization experiences within families and schools. The majority of the U.S. multiracial population reports some White ancestry (Jones et al. 2021; Jones and Bullock 2013). Although scholars have noted a need for more empirical research on the experiences of multiracial groups with two or more non-White ancestries (Garay and Remedios 2021; Washington 2017), most multiracial Americans engage with Whiteness from the position of holding some White ancestry themselves. Below, I outline multiracial research that engages with Whiteness, suggesting that scholars move away from imposing monoracial identities or classifications onto multiracial people, and shifting to more productive inquiries into the nuances and contradictions present in multiracial experiences, including how they engage with Whiteness, which may not be observable when analysis is mired in a monoracial paradigm.

One area of multiracial and Whiteness research engages questions on whether multiracial Americans are becoming, or will increasingly become, White. This question also animates scholarship addressing the prediction that the U.S. will become a "majority-minority" society, in which White Americans will no longer comprise the majority of the U.S. population. Given that this narrative bolsters White supremacist "replacement theories" and has been shown to fuel White Americans' fear of demographic change (Craig and Richeson 2014), scholars have argued

that it is crucial to think critically about what "majority minority" means. Alba, Levy, and Myers (2021) suggest that White Americans will not become a visible minority because the meanings behind "White" and "non-White" have shifted over time, "one-drop rule" norms of hypodescent are decreasing or no longer relevant, and racial demographic shifts are being driven in large part by a growing multiracial population who will increasingly identify as White (Alba 2018, 2020). Yet characterizations of multiracial Americans, particularly multiracial Asian and Latiné Americans, as White or becoming White may be premature.

Qualitative studies of multiracial identity paint a complex picture, which may include both relative privileges compared to their racialized, monoracial counterparts, and continued experiences with racism (Chong and Song 2022). Multiracial individuals often discuss circumstances in which they are not considered White; face uncomfortable situations when others assume them to be White, such as witnessing racist behaviors that take place only in "backstage" White spaces (Picca and Feagin 2007); or simply do not wish to identify as White (Bettez 2011; Khanna 2010; Sims 2016; Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2019; Sims and Njaka 2019). Multiracial individuals also experience monoracism, defined by Johnston and Nadal (2010) as "a social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories" (125). Also referred to as monoracialism (Johnston-Guerrero and Mohajeri 2022), monoracism is an inherent feature of American constructions of race and American life, bolstered by notions of racial purity, and present in all manner of contexts, from official records to interactions with others (Gay, Farinu, and Issano Jackson 2022; Harris 2017; Johnston and Nadal 2010). Overall, multiracial individuals' experiences bumping up against racial categories and boxes demonstrate the

inadequacies and persistent monoracialism of our social constructions of race (Harris 2016, 2017; Johnston and Nadal 2010).

In line with this complexity, there may be instances in which some segments of the multiracial population identify as White, but I argue that we do not yet have a clear understanding of what it means to identify as White nor what multiracial individuals are signaling when they claim White identities. Whiteness functions in complicated ways, acts as more than a racial identity, and may be used as a proxy for other desirable concepts such as national citizenship (i.e., Americanness), cultural belonging, "normalcy," or an absence of race-related barriers/notable experiences with racial discrimination. Thus, when individuals discuss Whiteness, there is more at play than simple self-identification. Characterizing Asian and Latiné multiracial individuals as "White-leaning" risks ignoring lived experiences reported in empirical research, downplaying racism, and centering Whiteness as a desirable end goal (Chong and Song 2022). Rather than imposing a White/non-White dichotomy onto multiracial individuals, more compelling research has begun to address the complexities and nuances of multiracial individuals' engagement with Whiteness. For example, with respect to family, scholars of multiraciality have identified experiences of White privilege "by proxy" (Waring 2023), strategies for navigating racist experiences as a family unit (Johnson 2024), and families as a source of discrimination themselves (Mehta 2023; Waring 2025).

Study Focus, Case Justification, and Research Questions

Given the varied ways that multiracial individuals appear to interact with Whiteness, as well as claims that the multiracial population could become White, this study focused first on multiracial individuals' engagement with Whiteness. During interviews, I explicitly asked multiracial individuals about whether and to what degree they believe they are viewed as White,

their degree of identification with a White identity, and their understandings of Whiteness in general, to move beyond traditional approaches to studying race that have implicitly treated Whiteness as default and invisible (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Next, I examined two sources of potential ethnic-racial socialization that might inform their views: family and education. Given the importance of family in multiracial identity development (Rollins and Hunter 2013; Schlabach 2013; Seider and Huguley 2023; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020), one component of this research focuses on childhood and familial experiences related to race. I initially set out to study the ethnic-racial socialization messages that multiracial individuals receive from family members, but following surprises in the data (Firebaugh 2008; Pugh 2013; Timmermans and Tavory 2022) led elsewhere. A second component focuses on multiracial students' educational experiences. While my initial analysis focused on the messages about race that schools and teachers taught their students, multiracial students almost universally reported limited and dissatisfactory instruction with their formal education on race and racism. Instead, they focused on the impact of peers, thus I consider all these factors together, under the umbrella of ethnic-racial socialization and racialization messages in educational settings. Research in this area for multiracial students identifies a clear lack of instruction related to multiracial experiences (Peng 2024), as well as experiences of monoracism such as identity invalidation, dismissal, and forced monoracial categorization (Harris 2016, 2017; Wijeyesinghe and Johnston-Guerrero 2023).

Case Justification

This study's case is multiracial young adults (18-24) currently living or attending school in Indiana. This section provides a justification for studying 1) the multiracial population and 2) focusing on the Midwest.

Why Multiracial Individuals? Due to the seemingly exponential growth of the multiracial population, multiracial individuals have been considered a useful case for studying aspects of the U.S. racial structure, including racial progress, the prevalence or decline of racism, and the boundaries of Whiteness. Yet, many studies use the multiracial population to make broad claims without referencing multiracial individuals' lived experiences. For example, Lee and Bean (2010) argue that the U.S. color line is shifting from White/non-White to Black/non-Black by drawing heavily on the experiences of a small sample of multiracial individuals living in California, arguing that race is not as salient for multiracial Asian/White and Latiné/White Americans as it is for their Black/White or monoracial counterparts. Similarly, Alba (2018, 2020) calls on scholars to remain critical of the demographic projection that the U.S. will become a "majority-minority society," in part due to the argument that this shift is being driven by the growing multiracial population, who he argues may identify as White. Similar arguments proliferate in political sociology and political science, in which some have argued that certain Latiné American groups are "becoming white" based on conservative voting patterns (Kaufmann 2019). Yet this argument appears to conflate race with political behavior or beliefs, raising questions about whether scholars similarly conflate measures of inequality or discrimination with racial identity or racial group membership to argue that multiracial Americans are becoming White. While being critical of the "majority minority" framing of U.S. demographic shifts is reasonable, on both scholarly and pragmatic levels, the claim that the majority of multiracial individuals will identify and be seen as White requires more investigation.

Disparities. Contrary to the line of thinking that suggests multiracial individuals are becoming White, the multiracial population also experiences disparities in health and education, relative to their monoracial counterparts. While scholars should avoid falling into the outdated

and racist “tragic mulatto” trope, multiracials nonetheless continue to experience challenges specific to this group. The multiracial population has lower rates of mental health, including greater stress, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of depression relative to monoracial White peers and in some cases, monoracial non-White peers as well (Bratter and Gorman 2011; Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow 2010; Wong-Padoongpatt et al. 2017). They may experience some of the same forms of discrimination and microaggressions as their non-White monoracial counterparts but also report experiencing microaggressions unique to multiracial individuals (Gay et al. 2022; Heilman 2022; Johnston and Nadal 2010). Multiracial college students also have lower rates of enrollment, retention, and degree attainment, compared to monoracial peers (Mitchell and Warren 2022). Inequalities faced by the multiracial population have sometimes been dismissed as not as pressing or severe as those faced by monoracial non-White groups. Scholars have also argued that studying multiracials detracts from progress that needs to be made for monoracial non-White groups (Thompson 2007). However, these arguments are predicated on a simplistic, scarcity-focused view of inequality. Social realities are complex, and multiracial individuals can and do experience inequalities both tied to their multiple monoracial ancestries and unique to their liminal position as multiracial people in a monoracial categorical structure (Brunsma, Delgado, and Rockquemore 2013; Gay et al. 2022; Root 1990; Thornton 1992).

Although multiracial college students have dominated multiraciality research, they remain an important population to study. Beyond the disparities in higher education, college students, and multiracial young adults (18-24) more broadly, remain a strong case to examine developing racial identities. College is a setting in which young adults often live on their own for the first time and encounter populations comprised of a different racial makeup than the local neighborhoods and schools in which they grew up. As such, race may become more salient for

college students, sparking more reflection and consideration of their own identities (Harris 1995, 2016; Herman 2004; Renn 2000). College and young adulthood are also stages of life in which racial identity is still developing and changing, providing an important look at how young adults today navigate race and identity.

Today's sociopolitical context includes a greater awareness of multiracial identities, more public figures who identify with multiracial ancestries, and a proliferation of casually used racial identity monikers like "Wasian" and "Blasian." Young adults also experience increased connectivity online, which allows individuals to build explicit connections and community with other multiracial/mixed-race groups or simply witness others expressing and discussing multiracial identities in public online spaces. Finally, the current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. is one of heightened awareness of racial tensions (and racism), as Black Lives Matter, racialized police violence, racial disparities during COVID-19, anti-Asian hate incidents, and racialized mass shootings frequently occupy news cycles. Much research on multiracial individuals was conducted in the context of the Obama era (Jeffries 2012; Jolivette 2012; Mitchell 2022), particularly as Obama himself is biracial and claims of a post-racial America were common during his presidency. Yet I argue that the context today, under a second Trump administration, reflects glaring and persistent racial divides as well as a heightened awareness of race for the majority of Americans. Given that race is contextual and socially constructed, the current sociopolitical climate undoubtedly has an impact on societal and individual understandings of race and racial identity.

Groupness. Multiracial identities and experiences are complex, and even the notion of "multiracial" as a group is up for debate. As already mentioned above, what we measure when we talk about the "multiracial population" is complicated and might not always reflect what we

think it does. A related issue is the degree to which multiracials can be considered a "group" and not simply a category. While questions about "groupness" can be applied to other racial and ethnic groups (Brubaker 2002), the groupness of the U.S. multiracial population is even more tenuous. To what degree do or can multiracial Americans see themselves and identify as a cohesive group? Compared to some countries, multiracial Americans do not hold a strong collective identity, as this category has not been given legitimacy or reinforced by U.S. categorization practices, as it has been in Brazil and South Africa (DaCosta 2007; Daniel 2022). However, growing empirical research suggests the accessibility of online communities may foster the development of ancestry-specific group identities and cultures, which may shape or be shaped by global communities, such as "Wasian" (White and Asian) and "Blasian" (Black and Asian) (Gay, Farinu, and Issano Jackson 2022; King-O'Riain 2022; Matsuda-Rivero 2025). Thus, American multiraciality may be especially prone to shifting based on context, time, sociopolitical climate, and globalization, requiring scholars to remain attentive to potential changes and persist in maintaining the study of this population over time.

Why the Midwest (Indiana)? The Midwest presents a good site for studying both multiracial identity and Whiteness. First, multiracial identity has been most often studied in the Western United States, leaving questions about how multiracial identities and experiences might differ in less racially diverse contexts. In their review, Charmaraman, Woo, Quach, and Erkut (2014) find that 31 percent of studies on multiracial populations studied the West Coast, with the majority focused on California. Hawaii, the state with the highest percentage of multiracial individuals, is also commonly studied. Multiracial identity in the Midwest, especially outside of large urban centers like Chicago, are less common, perhaps in part due to challenges finding and accessing this population in locations with a smaller multiracial population.

Second, predominantly White states such as Indiana present an important site in which to examine Whiteness. As race is contextual, understandings and experiences of Whiteness should vary by location. However, Indiana is not only a predominantly White state (84.2 percent White), but located in an overwhelmingly White region of the country (73 percent White) (U.S. Census Bureau 2021), in which the experiences of diverse non-White groups are often obscured under an assumption of racial homogeneity.

Indiana is also a politically conservative state, and Whiteness is at times conflated with conservatism. Conservative Whiteness is seen as operating differently than liberal Whiteness (Ebert 2021; Hughey 2012). Americans in small, predominantly White towns also appear to have vastly different experiences with and understandings of race compared to diverse urban centers and coastal cities (Gonzales, Thissell, and Thorat 2022; McDermott 2020; Walton 2021), where studies of multiraciality have overwhelmingly taken place. Indeed, findings in this study suggest that understandings of race in Indiana can be starkly different than accounts provided in the multiracial literature. For example, a Mexican/White participant from Indiana shared that she had been temporarily disowned by her White grandparents "for coming out brown," while an Asian/White participant revealed that her grandmother had never encountered an Asian person or even heard the word "Asian" until her White mother and Asian father married. Given this unique racial context, my study examines how race, Whiteness, and multiraciality are experienced by those born and raised in Indiana, as well as individuals who grew up elsewhere and moved to Indiana for college.

Research Questions

- Research Question 1. How do multiracial individuals understand and engage with Whiteness, in their own identities and society at large?

- Research Question 2. How do multiracial families navigate ethnic-racial socialization in the face of differing lived experiences? How do multiracial families reproduce or challenge the U.S. racial structure and (multi)racial progress narratives?
- Research Question 3. What messages about race and racism do multiracial students navigate in schools, from both schools (curricula, teachers, and staff) and peers? How do students respond to school ethnic-racial socialization messages?

Data and Methods

This research draws on qualitative interviews with 55 multiracial young adults, between ages 18 to 24, attending college in Indiana. This IRB-approved study also included an optional photo elicitation component during interviews, in which participants were given the opportunity to share one or more photographs they viewed as relevant to multiracial identity and explain it during the interview. In this dissertation, I treat photos primarily as an interview tool that at times granted additional insights into participants' lives and/or greater depth on the topics discussed. While analyses of participant-provided photos are not provided here, I discuss future plans for analyzing photographic data in the concluding chapter.

Methodology

This research is informed by interpretivist, critical race, and critical multiracial (MultiCrit) frameworks. The interpretivist framework, commonly accepted and applied in qualitative interview studies, operates under the premise that multiple truths are possible and that research studies capture individuals' interpretations of events. This is arguably the primary perspective taken by those wishing to move beyond a positivist framework, which assumes the existence of a single universal and knowable truth (Bhattacharya 2017; Merriam and Tisdell 2015). Critical Race Theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2017) and one of its spin-offs, Critical

Multiracial Theory or MultiCrit (Harris 2016), inform this work in substantive and methodological ways. While my interview questions on multiracial identity are not explicitly focused on racism, this research begins from the assumption that racism is embedded in social structures, informing systems of racial categorization, public understandings of race, and media representations of race, to provide only a few examples, that in turn shape multiracial young adults' understandings of race and their own racial identities.

I also apply critical race (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Ray 2022) and critical multiracial (Harris 2016) perspectives to disrupt the treatment of Whiteness as default, center, and a normative point of comparison. Rather than focusing on the degree to which multiracial individuals do or do not identify with their non-White ancestries, this project aspires to explicitly consider how Whiteness informs multiracial identities. Thus in my analysis, I call attention to Whiteness, interrogating its meanings for multiracial individuals, their identities and experiences.

Qualitative Interviews

This project draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews to ask about multiracial college students' understandings of their own identities, their experiences with race up until this point in their lives, and their experiences with race in college. Qualitative interviews enable researchers to obtain in-depth responses from participants about various life events and perspectives. Interviews are ideal for understanding participants' interpretations of events and how these shape their experiences (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lamont and Swidler 2014). This method also allows researchers to inquire further about the reasoning behind participants' beliefs and interpretations (Pugh 2013) and provide insight into "discursive" (Vaisey 2009) and "declarative" (Lizardo 2017) understandings of social life. As such, I primarily apply an interpretivist methodology, in which individuals' understandings are just as important as a

supposed “objective” account of events. For example, I cannot give a thorough accounting of every instance that a participant encountered racism in schools, but my data can detail instances of racism that were the most impactful and memorable in a participant’s school life. I also integrate a symbolic interactionist perspective, which holds that individuals create meaning based on interactions with other people and objects (Mead 1934). However, lines between methodological paradigms are often blurry and as some scholars argue, can unnecessarily limit the types of analysis and conclusions drawn (Roth and Mehta 2002; Silverman 1998). Building on arguments that consider how interpretivist and positivist analyses supplement one another, I engage in limited positivist analysis, for example, by considering not only participants’ understandings of how others interpret their race based on appearance (interpretivist) but the snapshots of appearance they provide through photo elicitation (positivist-leaning). Finally, I employed a semi-structured approach, using an interview guide (see Appendix D) but remained open to following the flow of conversation established by the participant.

Data and Sample

I conducted interviews with 55 multiracial young adults (18-24) attending college in the state of Indiana at the time of the interviews. Forty interviewees voluntarily participated in the photo elicitation component of the interview, sharing a total of 107 photos. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, from 2021 to 2023. The study sample was drawn from three universities across Indiana, with most interviews taking place in southern Indiana.

Race and racial identity are highly contextual; multiracial identities are shaped by geographic region. For example, Black/White multiracial individuals are more likely to identify as Black in the South, where historically the one-drop rule was heavily enforced, but as bi- or multiracial in the West, where there is a large multiracial population today (Davenport 2018;

Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Geographic region, the racial diversity of a region, and college narratives around diversity and race are additional factors that influence students' understandings of race, with the college context providing a unique case (Renn 2004; Warikoo 2016). Young adults' racial identities continue to develop in college as they often interact with peers from diverse racial backgrounds and an array of perspectives (Herman 2004; Renn 2004). Given that the racial diversity of an institution impacts racial identity, we can expect multiracial individuals to understand race, racial identity, and Whiteness differently depending on the racial makeup of their institution, city, state, and/or region, both with respect to where they attend college and where they grew up.

In terms of region, qualitative studies of multiracial identity have commonly taken place in the South, California, and Hawaii, in large coastal cities (Davenport 2018; Khanna 2011; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). However, given the extent to which race is contextual and situational (Okamura 1981; Renn 2000), experiences with race in regions that are less racially diverse and have significantly smaller multiracial populations are likely to differ. While large-scale quantitative studies have examined survey responses in national samples (Campbell 2007; Davenport 2018; Doyle and Kao 2007), in-depth understandings of race and racial identity, particularly with respect to Whiteness, are absent in these studies.

The Midwest is a unique case, being a region that is not only predominantly White but holds the reputation of being a White, rural region. These public narratives erase the existing racial and ethnic diversity in these states. As such, both the *actual* racial/ethnic diversity and *perceptions* of racial/ethnic diversity are likely to influence individual experiences with race. As a primarily conservative state, Indiana also presents an interesting political case, a relevant distinction as political orientation appears to influence multiracials' self-labeling choices

(Castillo 2022; Davenport 2018). Most qualitative studies on multiracial identity have been concentrated in liberal states and tend to focus on college students who lean liberal. However, multiracial adults are divided in their political views, with 48 percent describing their beliefs as moderate, 28 percent as conservative, and 21 as liberal (Parker et al. 2015). With respect to political party, 57 percent identify as or lean Democrat, while 37 percent identify as or lean Republican, with 6 percent not leaning toward either (Parker et al. 2015). Only a few participants in this study identified explicitly as conservative. However, most participants spoke to the ways in which a politically conservative environment has influenced their experiences with race and understandings of racial identity, discussing contexts they view as uniquely or extremely conservative.

Participant Demographic Information

The sample consists of 55 interviews and 40 elicited photos with multiracial young adults (18-24) in the Midwest. Among the 15 participants who did not share a photo, 5 shared descriptions of the photo they *would have* shared, if they could choose any existing photo, and 10 did not share any information about a photo. The latter group primarily consists of interviews conducted before I began asking participants to verbally describe a photo they would have shared, if they had access to any photo they chose.

Participants in the sample comprise a range of racial ancestries. Participants' broad racial ancestries, or the nature of their multiraciality, are listed in Table 1. The majority of participants were biracial, with one White ancestry (43). Three participants were biracial with no White ancestry, also described in the literature as "multiple minority" or "multiple minoritized" identity.

Table 1. Participant Multiraciality.

Participant Multiraciality	*Number of Participants*
Biracial (White + one other race)	43
Biracial (non-White only)	3
Bi/Multiethnic	3
Multiracial (three or more ancestries)	6
	55

Three participants fell into a category of being bi- or multi-ethnic, referring to parents whose ancestries fall into the same U.S. *racial* category (i.e., Asian) but different ethnic groups (i.e., Mexican, Colombian). Multiethnic participants who describe their parents as racialized differently often speak to the same themes as multiracial individuals. Six participants had three or more racial ancestries and were considered multiracial. Throughout this write-up, I use "multiracial" as an umbrella term that encompasses biracial individuals, but specify as needed when discussing participants with three or more racial ancestries.

Participants' racial and ethnic backgrounds are detailed in Table 2. The largest reported background was Asian and White, which holds additional complexities discussed further below, followed by Latiné and White, then Black and White.

Table 2 Participant Racial Ancestries.

Participant Races	*Number of Participants*	*Percent of Sample*
White, Asian*	22	40
White, Latiné**	15	27
White, Black	7	13
White, Native American	1	2
White, Two additional ancestries	6	11
Two non-White ancestries	3	5
Black (multiethnic)***	1	2
Total	*55*	*100*

* Asian includes Middle Eastern and North African (MENA).
** Includes two participants with two Latiné parents who are racialized differently.
*** This participant was excluded from the analytic sample, as both parents were racialized as Black.

Despite marking their ancestries as White and Latiné on surveys, two participants in this category had more complex racial and ethnic ancestries. One was clearly "multiethnic" as she has parents from two Latiné ethnicities, Mexican and Colombian. She described her Colombian parent as being racialized as White, compared to her Mexican parent as non-White. Another participant had two parents of Mexican ancestry, but explained that she had volunteered for the study since she had grown up considering herself to be multiracial, and discussed colorism, heavily tied to racialization, as a dominant part of her experience. She also spoke to ways in which her parents were racialized differently—her mother as White and her father as "Brown"/viewed as Mexican. The nature of Latiné identity is inherently multiracial or mixed, as an identity born of European and Native American interracial relationships during colonization of the Americas. Participants varied in the degree to which they acknowledged or held awareness of the mixedness of their Latiné heritage. However, these participants tended to mark White and Latiné on surveys, expressing an awareness of their European ancestry and the racialization of at least one parent as White. Given that these participants spoke to experiences in which their Latiné parents were racialized in different ways, I retained them in the analytic sample.

A third participant could be classified as Black and multiethnic, as she described her parents as being from two ethnic groups in the same African country. While this participant could speak to cultural differences between her parents' ethnic groups, she expected both to be racialized as Black in the U.S., a hypothetical speculation, as neither parent had been to the U.S. Ultimately, this participant's experiences could not speak to multiracial experiences in the U.S. in the same way as the two multiethnic Latiné participants described above, thus, I excluded her interview from analysis.

Finally, the White and Asian group of participants also holds additional complexities. Two participants held White and MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) ancestry. One chose to mark White and Asian on survey questions about race, while the other grappled with the formal categorization of MENA and Arab identities as White. The latter participant marked White and "Other" on the screening survey for this study, specifying her father's Palestinian ancestry. The sample also includes one White and Asian participant who has ancestry from Central Asia and is racialized quite differently than East Asians. This participant was adopted and raised by a White single mother, so he grappled with topics related to adoption and uncertainty about biological family members, in addition to more common topics discussed by other multiracial participants.

While these cases may complicate the conclusions I can draw about this sample of multiracial young adults, I maintain that these unique cases, which fall outside or between our limited and category-based constructions of race, are important to consider. One strength of qualitative research is the ability to compare the experiences of outliers against typical participant experiences, rather than excluding them from the sample. In so doing, the experiences of outliers can speak to either the pervasiveness or limits of identified patterns. As race and racial identities continue to shift and change over time, cases like those above may be crucial for social scientists to consider moving forward.

The reported gender distribution of participants is as follows: 41 women, 10 men, 3 non-binary, and 1 questioning. Limitations around the skewed gender distribution are discussed more extensively in chapter 1. Regarding sexual orientation, participants reported the following: 36 heterosexual, 1 gay, 10 bi/pansexual, and 8 questioning. The age range of participants is 18-24, with a median age of 19.

Finally, the socioeconomic status of participants, based on family income, skewed upward, with slightly less than half of participants reporting incomes of $100,000 or higher (see Table 3).

Table 3. Participant-Provided Household Income.

Household Income	*Number of Participants*
Below $20,000	3
$20,000 - $39,999	6
$40,000 - $59,999	2
$60,000 - $79,999	3
$80,000 - $99,999	5
$100,000 - $200,999	13
Over $200,000	11
Don't know/Prefer not to answer	12

Participants also reported religion in screening surveys. Non-belief and Protestant Christianity were the most commonly reported religious beliefs. Agnostic (8), atheist (4), and none (13) comprised slightly less than half of the sample (around 45 percent). Among those who held religious beliefs, religions included: Protestant Christian (10), Catholic (6), Muslim (8), and Buddhist (1). Five participants marked "Other" and listed their beliefs as Coahuiltecan and Iberian spirituality, Indigenous spirituality, Latter-Day Saint, Taoist, and Questioning (Buddhist/Protestant).

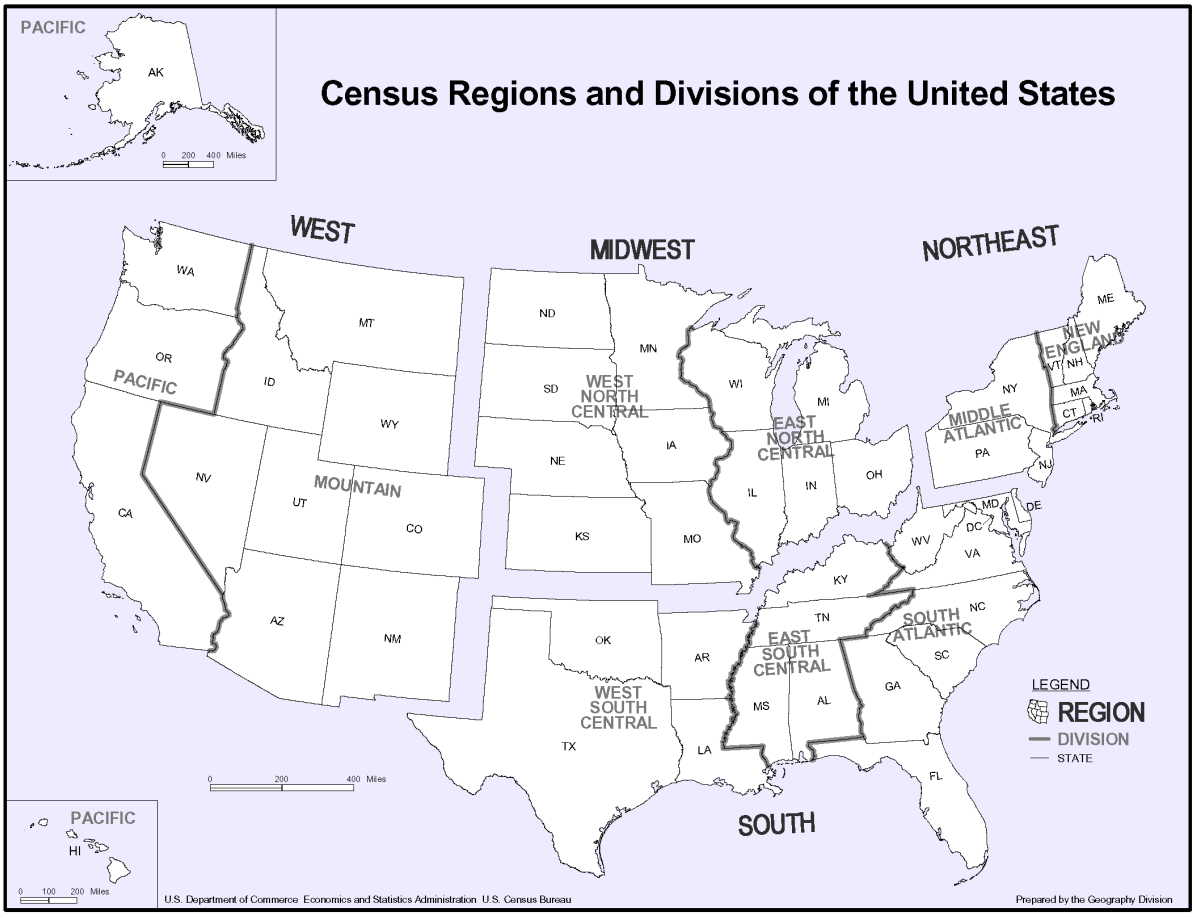
With respect to region, I asked participants to identify where they were born and where they grew up (see Table 4). Broadly, around two-thirds of the sample were born and raised in Indiana; roughly one-third lived outside of Indiana and moved to the state to attend university. Specifically, 64 percent of participants (35) grew up in Indiana, 31 percent (or 17 participants) grew up outside of Indiana, and 5 percent (3) spent time both in and outside of Indiana prior to turning 18. Participants were *born* in Indiana (24), a Midwestern state other than Indiana (13),

Northeast (3), South (4), West or Pacific (7), and Outside of the U.S. (4). Participants *grew up* Indiana (35), Midwest other than Indiana (3), Northeast (6), South (2), West or Pacific (2), in multiple U.S. regions (3), and Outside of the US (4).

Table 4. Regions in Which Participants Were Born and Raised

Location: Born	*Number of participants*	*Location: Grew Up*	*Number of participants*
Indiana	24	Indiana	35
Midwest	13	Midwest	3
Northeast	3	Northeast	6
South	4	South	2
West or Pacific	7	West or Pacific	2
		Multiple	3
Outside of US	4	Outside of US	4

Note: I refer to the regions established in the U.S. Census, which breaks the US into four broad categories.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

With respect to education, the college majors represented in the sample are as follows: Arts (4), Business (10), Humanities (4), Liberal Studies/Undecided (2), Social Science (14), and STEM (21). As there are no engineering or mathematics majors in the sample, "STEM" refers to natural sciences and technology (i.e., human biology, computer science). Six students had declared double majors; the most common second major was in social sciences, in addition to a first major in natural science or another social science. Two of the six added a humanities major to a first major in social science. Not included among those six students were three additional students completing double majors in Business (i.e., marketing and business management). See Table 5 for a full list of college majors represented.

Table 5. Participant College Majors.

Major (Broad)	Major (Specific)	Number
Arts	dance, fashion design, media	4
Business	accounting, entrepreneurship, finance, management, marketing	10
Humanities	Arabic, Chinese, education, English	4
Liberal Studies/Undecided	liberal studies, major not declared	2
Natural Sciences & Technology (STEM)	astrophysics, biochemistry, biology, cognitive science, community health, computer science, environmental science; exercise science, human biology, informatics, neuroscience, pre-med track	21
Social Sciences	anthropology, criminal justice, economics, law, international studies, political science, psychology	14

Recruitment

Study recruitment took place through undergraduate classes, particularly large introductory-level classes; email listservs of racial and ethnic student interest groups, associations, and cultural centers; and snowball sampling. Given that I began recruitment during the pandemic, in early 2021, recruitment efforts for the first 31 interviews took place virtually, primarily through emails to faculty and staff (i.e., in departments and centers). As in-person campus activities resumed, I shared study fliers in buildings across campus, such as student union buildings and common area bulletin boards in academic buildings. In a few cases, faculty invited me to share study information through brief class visits, in-person and in one case, over Zoom. Class visits ranged in discipline, and included hard sciences like chemistry, humanities fields like American studies, and business classes.

Participants received $25 for participation in an interview lasting between one to two hours, with a possibility for one to two follow-up interviews if needed and permission is given (see Appendix A for recruitment flier). I conducted a follow-up interview with one participant, while 10 provided additional information in a follow-up email. Providing payment may have encouraged individuals who did not have an explicit interest in the topic of multiracial identity to participate.

I recruited broadly for individuals who have parents of two or more racial backgrounds or identify as multiracial, using "multiracial" instead of "biracial" in recruitment materials to include individuals with three or more racial ancestries. I did not limit the sample to any racial ancestry combination. Potential participants completed a screening survey (see Appendix C) in which they confirmed that they are 18 years or older and had parents of two or more different racial ancestries.

Interview Topics

Interview questions addressed how multiracial individuals identify and asked them to reflect on their racial identity in several ways. I asked participants to describe at least six dimensions of race: their racial and ethnic background, their parents' racial/ethnic backgrounds, how they personally identify, how they mark their race and ethnicity on surveys (asking about three different survey formats), any genetic ancestry tests they or their family members have taken, and how their racial identity is shaped by appearance. Whiteness was often discussed at multiple points in the interview, including direct questions on whether and to what degree participants believed they appear White to others; to what extent they identify as White, if at all; and what Whiteness and White identity mean to them. A large portion of the interviews covered childhood and family contexts, in which participants discuss family structures, time spent with extended family or other kinship ties, and any conversations about race held with parents, siblings, or extended family members.

To address appearance, participants were first asked directly about the influence of appearance on their racial identity. Prior to the interview, participants were also informed about the study's photo elicitation option over email and had the option to share one or more photos, if they were willing to do so. Photographs often led to additional reflections on race and appearance. They also jogged memories of examples supporting participants' responses in the interview up to that point. Starting with the thirty-second interview, based on the feedback of my committee members, participants who choose not to share a photo were asked if there was a specific photo related to multiracial identity that they *would have* shared. If so, they were asked to describe this photo and the reason for their choice, mimicking the photo elicitation section of an interview. Finally, additional sections of the interview included experiences with race during

their K-12 education, college experiences, and in interactions and relationships with others outside of family. Interview questions covered dimensions of multiracial identity extensively, including any identification with Whiteness, experiences with family, and physical appearance.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed automatically through Zoom, which I later verified and corrected manually. I collected Zoom video recordings, Zoom audio recordings, and audio recording backups using a physical recorder. After each interview, I completed a brief, post-interview memo using a survey built in Qualtrics to reflect on general impressions during the interview, any methodological suggestions or improvements, and themes that were prominent in the interview. In these post-interview memos, I also provided a brief description of the participant, describing aspects of their personality or mannerisms that may have influenced the interview. These reflections served as tools to jog my memory when I returned to analyze each interview. They also served as indicators of interview quality, giving insight into a participant's degree of openness and engagement with interview topics. I also kept track of participants' emotional states, as well as my own. In some cases, emotions played a salient role in interviews, for example, eliciting strong emotions from the participant and/or myself.

After interviews and interview memos, transcription verification was the next point of contact and form of analysis. I engaged in preliminary coding or pre-coding (Saldaña 2015), noting themes or moments that stand out as I cleaned and corrected automated transcripts. These pre-codes were not systematic but functioned as bookmarks or signposts to return to during later stages of data analysis.

In analyzing interview data, I used an abductive theory approach, in which the researcher brings relevant theories to the research design and data analysis but is open to changes while

identifying themes (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This process reflects the reality that data analysis is most commonly an iterative process, in which the researcher moves back and forth between engagement with data (i.e., salient topics, identified themes), theory, and new empirical research.

My analytic process included three rounds of what I call "analytic checkpoints," in which I took stock all of interviews completed to date, identified salient themes, compared themes to my research questions, wrote extensive memos on these topics, and in some cases, sought feedback on preliminary findings and study methodology from colleagues. Interviews began with an initial round of three pilot interviews completed over the course of a graduate-level interviewing class in spring of 2021. I analyzed these three interviews for preliminary themes around multiracial identity and Whiteness, presented results to my classmates, and solicited feedback on study design. This initial analysis enabled me to adjust and become aware of questions that were potentially challenging for participants, as well as those that yielded insightful responses. I engaged in similar analytic checkpoints after the thirteenth interview (conducted in May 2022) and thirty-first interview (October 2022), receiving feedback from advisors upon admission to Ph.D. candidacy and from my committee during the dissertation proposal defense, respectively. At both checkpoints, I summarized themes present all interviews completed thus far, and reassessed the efficacy of study design, including interview questions, through analytic memos. Within each chapter, I provide additional details on how I arrived at specific findings around Whiteness, family, and education.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I examine multiracial young adults' experiences with Whiteness, responding to 1) the large percentage of the U.S. multiracial population that has White ancestry,

2) speculation that multiracial individuals are "becoming White," and 3) shifting narratives around Whiteness given the recent political and racial climate of the U.S. over the past decade. I argue that multiracial young adults who report that they are *always* or *can be* seen as White experience Whiteness as a double-edged sword. On one hand, they report receiving what Du Bois (1935) referred to as the public "wages of whiteness," which can be described as benefits for appearing White to others. Yet, Du Bois also spoke of a "psychological" wage that granted even working-class White Americans a feeling of superiority over Black Americans during the Reconstruction era. On the other hand, I argue multiracial individuals experience a psychological "tax," rather than a wage for appearing White. This tax takes the form of challenges to authenticity and belonging, experiences of vicarious racism, and emotions such as shame and guilt for benefitting from their White appearance. Ultimately, I argue that these findings demonstrate a growing need to update social scientific frameworks for understanding race and shifting from a monoracial paradigm to a multiracial paradigm, which would acknowledge the growing number of individuals who navigate multiple racial identities, within a relatively persistent monoracial categorization system.

In Chapter 2, I examine bidirectional racial socialization in multiracial families. I build on literature that acknowledges racial socialization as a bidirectional process but has yet to place much focus on how children themselves engage in direct socialization. Within multiracial families, monoracial parents do not necessarily enter parenthood prepared to teach their children about race. I find that at times, children step in and instead, teach parents about race and racism. This chapter examines the types of messages children communicate to their parents; under what circumstances they attempt to engage in socialization, as well as when they do *not* engage; and their motivations for doing so. Multiracial children, whether as adolescents or adult children,

engage in a form of hidden labor within their own families. Multiracial progress narratives assume that members of interracial unions and multiracial families are progressive and anti-racist, and that their existence heralds a decrease in racism and increase in racial equity. However, these data highlight moments of racism and racial ignorance within multiracial families, and the ways children attempt to rectify them.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I examine ethnic-racial socialization messages and racialization experiences in K-12 schools. I find that first, multiracial students overwhelmingly described instruction on race in their schools as lacking and unsatisfactory. Instead, they received frequent messages that communicated race and racism were unimportant topics of study. Second, multiracial students reported blatant racialization experiences within schools, which stood in stark contrast to instruction and curricula choices that depicted race as unimportant. Third, multiracial students described peer interactions within schools as highly influential to their understandings of race, morality, and identity, citing both supportive peers, who validated their identities and sense of belonging, and negative role models, who expressed racist views. Rather than acting as passive recipients of racism, these instances demonstrated that multiracial students solidified their own views on race, politics, and morality by positioning themselves as opposite to, or unlike, racist peers. In some cases, these moments led multiracial individuals to explicitly seek out more information on race and politics. Finally, some participants reported cutting off friendships with peers who expressed racist views, protecting themselves but perhaps in the process, revealing how polarization can take place on a micro-level. Ultimately, schools were places where participants learned a lot about race, not through classroom instruction but in schools' omission of race-related topics, experiences of racialization, and through the navigation of race, racism, and identity with peers.

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Chapter 1:

Multiracial Young Adults' Experiences of Whiteness as a Wage, Contingent Status, and Tax

Projections that the U.S. will become a "majority-minority" society, in which White[1] Americans become the numerical minority compared to a larger non-White collective, are now commonly known (Jones et al. 2021). Reactions to this projection have been varied, from being viewed as reflective of an increasingly racially diverse America and automatic shift toward greater racial equality (Ray et al. 2017; Seamster and Ray 2018; Waring 2023), to a threat to the hegemonic White status quo (Lewis 2004, Hughey 2012) and White supremacist ideals (Craig and Richeson 2014). Researchers themselves have also questioned the implications of this projection. While some scholars scorn the phrasing of this projection as a Western and European-centric view that does not acknowledge that globally, Whites have never been the numerical majority, others have critiqued this demographic shift as inaccurate using assimilationist theory, arguing that this shift is being driven by a multiracial[2] population who will "become White," creating a "new American mainstream" (Alba 2018, 2020; Lee and Bean 2007). Yet these "White-leaning" arguments rely on assumptions about Whiteness that may no longer hold true and does not consider the possibility that the "monoracial paradigm" that has long dominated American race research may too be shifting.

There is reason to question whether multiracial Americans today will attempt to claim Whiteness the way that previous groups of Americans have, and whether multiracial Americans will be universally and consistently viewed and treated as White. Understandably, sociologists have tended to treat Whiteness as a positive status, associated with privilege, status, and greater access to material resources. These experiences certainly exist and persist (Du Bois 1935;

McIntosh 1988; Rothenberg 2015; Waring 2023). Yet Whiteness as a system of power and hierarchy is not ubiquitously positive, even for Whites themselves. Failing to access middle class standards of Whiteness can saddle poor and working-class Whites with a unique form of racialized stigma (McDermott 2006). Acting to preserve a system which keeps Whites at the top of the racial hierarchy has led Whites to act against their own class interests, to maintain access to a "psychological wage" and aspire to the promise of material wages of Whiteness (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991). Today these contradictions persist, resulting in consequences for health, access to social services, and increasing "deaths of despair" among America's White population (Case and Deaton 2015; Metzl 2019; Siddiqi et al. 2019).

However, the recent sociopolitical climate in the U.S. also appears to have resulted in shifting meanings of Whiteness. In today's context, racial diversity appears to be simultaneously celebrated (primarily by those on the political left) (Warikoo 2016) and denigrated (primarily by those on the political right) (Ray 2022:20; Warikoo 2022). Similarly, Whiteness today is also celebrated (including by White supremacists and White Christian nationalists) (Blee, Futrell, and Simi 2023; Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020) and denigrated (including by scholars who study racism and the construction of Whiteness as a colonialist and capitalist project) (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991; Torkelson and Hartmann 2021).

Multiracial young adults today have also grown up in a racially contentious climate, marked by events such as the 2016 rise in anti-immigrant sentiment encouraged by the Trump administration, 2017 Charleston White supremacist march, 2020 racial justice protests in response to racialized police brutality, a COVID-19-related rise in anti-Asian violence, and the 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol. Unlike the post-racial rhetoric dominant under the Obama administration, today's young adults have seen nationwide acknowledgements of racism as well

as increasingly visible White supremacist activity. Within these contexts, how are multiracial individuals making sense of race and Whiteness?

If multiracial individuals are "becoming White," we may expect that: 1) multiracial Americans will increasingly be recognized as White by the larger American society and 2) they will increasingly identify as White. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 55 multiracial young adults (ages 18-24), and focusing on 37 who have White ancestry, I ask: 1) To what extent are multiracial young adults with claims to Whiteness recognized by others as White? and 2) To what extent do multiracial young adults claim their relationship to Whiteness? Answering these questions, I find that multiracial Americans with White ancestry are not, at least universally, "becoming White." Multiracial individuals can and do experience the "wages of Whiteness," defined as material or psychological forms of compensation granted to individuals who are interpreted as White, including experiences of White privilege. However, I find that multiracial Americans may not have access to the psychological component of this wage, in part because they experience what I call a *tax on Whiteness*. This psychological tax is defined as costs experienced by individuals who are interpreted as White, which lessen or counteract benefits from the White wage. Due to the contextual nature of race and Whiteness, multiracial individuals are not guaranteed consistent access to White wages, making Whiteness a *contingent status*. Even when their White ancestry would allow them to make claims to Whiteness, today's young adults have come of age during a time when Whiteness is increasingly associated with racism, oppression, and a visible resurgence in White supremacy (Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020). As a result, claiming Whiteness is not merely a matter of personal identity nor a neutral reflection of ancestry, but involves navigation of a complex racial terrain.

Approaches to Multiraciality: From Identity to Structure

Researchers have long examined multiraciality by focusing on identity development and identification patterns (Khanna 2011a; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Root 1996, 2000). Multiracial individuals identify in a variety of ways, from monoracial identities to uniquely multiracial identity monickers such as mixed, bi/multiracial, hapa, "Blasian" (Black and Asian) and "Wasian" (White and Asian). Multiracial identities may change over time (Doyle and Kao 2007; Hitlin, Scott Brown, and Elder 2006; Jones 2011) and are highly contextual, influenced by domains such as family racial socialization (Atkin et al. 2021; Jones and Rogers 2023) and educational contexts (Brittian, Umaña-Taylor, and Derlan 2013; Harris 2017; Renn 2008). An important advancement in this literature was the establishment of ecological approaches to multiracial identity (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009; Root 1990), which considered contextual forces alongside individual attributes. However, in light of this work, the number of possible multiracial identity configurations may be impossible and even unfruitful to label (Brunsma, Delgado, and Rockquemore 2013). Rather, some domains of the "multiracial experience" are best characterized by their consistent *in*consistency (Sims 2016). Prevailing inconsistencies and seemingly unlimited configurations of identity may suggest we have reached the limits of studying multiraciality through identity choices, using only a monoracial paradigm.

Scholars of multiraciality have increasingly done the work of recognizing and challenging monoracial paradigms as insufficient to understand how race operates today and will continue to evolve over time. The "monoracial imperative," coined by G. Reginald Daniel (2021), points out the notion that multiracial individuals must navigate the long-standing paradigm concept of "pure" mutually exclusive racial categories, even as their existence calls this into question. Johnston and Nadal (2010) established the concept of monoracism, "a social

system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories" (125). Notably, Harris (2016) has developed a Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit) within education, an extension of Critical Race Theory intended to account for "the racialized experiences of multiracial students" and uncover the effects of racism for both multiracial and monoracial individuals (798). An acknowledgement of this hegemonic monoracial paradigm and the analytic tools of MultiCrit enable new ways of conceptualizing multiracial experiences, calling attention to the "invisible minority" status felt by multiracial individuals (Waring 2014). Monoracism brings the undeniable connection between race and racism to the forefront, and serves as a reminder that multiraciality does not function in an identity studies vacuum but is shaped by systems of racial oppression and White supremacy.

Whiteness in Multiraciality: From Identity to Advantage

Whiteness operates both as an individual identity and an aspect of the social structure designed for domination over non-White peoples (McDermott and Ferguson 2022), which upholds systemic racism to preserve White privilege and power (Feagin 2013). However, Whiteness for multiracial individuals has often been studied exclusively at the level of identity. White identities were long inaccessible to multiracial individuals due to "one-drop rule" categorization norms. As these norms shifted, research followed accordingly, examining the degree to which multiracial individuals began to claim White and/or multiracial identities, as opposed to monoracial non-White identities (Khanna 2011b; Korgen 1998; Liebler 2016). Yet, claims to Whiteness do not simply reflect ancestry. Instead, Whiteness functions as an exclusive good, granting privileges in the form of concrete, economic resources, as well as psychological status (Du Bois 1935; Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1988; Myers 2022).

As a resource and status, Whiteness maintains exclusivity to preserve its position of domination (Lipsitz 2006). However, given the monoracial paradigm in the U.S., multiracial people may be interpreted as White regardless of how they personally identify. Individuals may express frustration at feeling "forced to pass" (Rockquemore 2005) or being unwillingly labeled White (Bettez 2011; Chong and Song 2022; Jones and Rogers 2022). These frustrations also speak to the limits of a monoracial paradigm, within which there is no room to hold multiple racial identities simultaneously; one identity is always expected to supersede the other.

Rather than studied solely as an identity, Whiteness should be considered a system, or structuring property (Harris 2019), that multiracial individuals are both shaped by and may at times access, whether due to their own White or light-skinned appearance or through a White family member (Waring 2023). In discussing the "paradoxical nature of White privilege" for multiracial individuals, Waring (2023) identifies both advantages and disadvantages to Whiteness, expanding our understandings of how White privilege functions (58). This study adds to this initial examination of how White privilege operates for multiracial individuals, considers how the contingent and exclusive nature of Whiteness limits this privilege, and examines subtle and psychological forms of disadvantage emerging from the complicated White status multiracial individuals might claim. I argue that multiracial young adults who can access Whiteness experience it as both a wage (benefit) and a tax (harm). For this group, the wages of Whiteness are *moderated* by an inseparable tax, which exists in part due to the contingent and exclusive nature of Whiteness.

Data and Methods

This project draws on a sample of 55 interviews with multiracial young adults (ages 18-24), focusing on 37 who reported always or sometimes being seen as White to examine how they

experience Whiteness, focusing on the degree to which they are recognized as White by others and their degree of identification with Whiteness. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to ask about multiracial college students' understandings of their own identities, their experiences with race until this point in their lives, and their experiences with race in college. I also asked about racial identities with respect to Whiteness, appearance, and interactions with others, including family. I recruited from colleges and universities throughout a predominantly White Midwestern state, in large introductory classes across departments, through campus cultural centers, and on student organization listservs, resulting in participants from three universities.

Although multiracial young adults in Midwestern states are not representative of all multiracial people in the U.S., their experiences are particularly relevant for this study. Unlike coastal cities and urban centers with a large multiracial population (Jones et al. 2021), Midwestern communities are Whiter and more mixed politically (Jensen et al. 2021). As a result, multiracial young adults in Midwestern communities may have more personal experience with the competing tensions around diversity and Whiteness that exist in the U.S. today. This may be particularly true for multiracial college students like the ones I interview, who may find that the politically and racially progressive ideas they encounter in college differ from those they have previously encountered in primarily White home communities.

The majority of participants have one White parent (78%), with the largest racial ancestry groups being Asian-White (38%) and Latiné-White (24%).[3] The racial ancestries of participants are as follows: 21 White-Asian, 13 White- Latiné, seven White-Black, one White-Native, and six White and at least two other ancestries. Three participants were multiethnic, rather than multiracial; only one of these participants had parents who were not racialized differently and has been excluded from the sample. Finally, three participants had two non-White ancestries: one

was Latiné-Black and two were Latiné-Asian. Among participants with Asian ancestry, five participants identify as Middle Eastern though they varied in whether they marked White or Asian on surveys that ask about race.

Table 1. Participant Racial Ancestries.

Participant Races	*Number of Participants*	*Percent of Sample*
White, Asian*	22	40
White, Latiné**	15	27
White, Black	7	13
White, Native American	1	2
White, Two additional ancestries	6	11
Two non-White ancestries	3	5
Black (multiethnic)***	1	2
Total	*55*	*100*

* Asian includes Middle Eastern and North African (MENA).
** Includes two participants with two Latiné parents who are racialized differently.
*** This participant was excluded from the analytic sample, as both parents were racialized as Black.

Participants completed a screening survey prior to their interview, which allowed me to assess eligibility and collect demographic information. Reported family household income categories were below $50k (13), $50-99k (13), $100-200k (17), and over $200k (12). The self-reported gender of participants was 41 women, 10 men, 3 non-binary, and 1 questioning. Regarding sexual orientation, 36 marked heterosexual, 1 marked gay, 10 bi/pansexual, and 8 questioning. The skewed gender distribution is a clear limitation of the study, as research has documented differences in how men and women experience multiraciality differently (Davenport 2016; Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Newman 2019). Further, five men reported never being seen as White, perhaps speaking to stricter racialization experiences by men relative to women (Vasquez 2010), so their experiences are not included in this article. As a result, this study speaks primarily to the experiences of heterosexual, upper-middle class, and light-skinned women attending college. College is a relatively unique social context that impacts individuals' racial regard, or feelings about one's own racial group(s) (Clayton 2019), racial identity development (Clayton 2020;

Renn 2004), and some sociopolitical beliefs (Campbell and Horowitz 2016). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the degree of reflection on one's own racial identity and racial position with respect to a range of diverse groups may be higher among those who attended college compared to those who have not.

Finally, this research is informed by my positionality as an Asian/White multiracial woman with light skin. Recruitment materials did not give any indication that this research was being done by a researcher with multiracial ancestry, as my name could be read as White and European. Eligibility around race was described simply as "parents of two or more racial ancestries" to encourage individuals to participate even if they do not necessarily identify with the term "multiracial." Once eligible participants were identified from a screening survey, and had scheduled interviews, I began interviews with a description of the study, and included a disclosure of my ethnic-racial identities as a personal motivator for the study, in addition to academic interest. As research on "insider" and "outsider" positionality has established, I found that this disclosure may have helped establish rapport with participants, but could also lead them to make assumptions about my understanding of their experiences. To mitigate this issue, I used language such as "I think I know what you mean, but how would you explain that to someone who has no idea?" Overall, my positionality may have enabled me to develop rapport more quickly with some participants, while potentially being less attuned to dynamics that disproportionately impact participants who operated from a different matrix of identities than my own, for example, participants who are men and/or have darker skin tones. I attempted to mitigate this potential limitation by using follow-up questions, being attentive to body language and emotional cues, and following threads of conversation offered by participants.

Analytic Focus

In this paper, I focus on 37 participants who are always or sometimes seen as White, to examine experiences with White privilege, totaling 37 participants. Eleven participants (20 percent of the sample) reported being *always* seen as White by others, provided there were no racial signifiers that revealed their non-White ancestry, such as a surname or presence of a non-White family member. This group is initially interpreted as White based on appearance, but could be racialized as non-White at a later point, based on other factors. Twenty-six participants—the largest group, comprising 47 percent of the full sample—reported that they were *sometimes* seen as White by others. This group occupies a "racially ambiguous" middle, whose the most consistent shared experience is that of *inconsistent* racial appraisals (Sims 2016). For this middle group, others' perceptions are typically unpredictable but could include an interpretation of the individual as White. Finally, 18 participants (about 33 percent of the sample), reported never being seen as White. Given that these individuals did not report having access to Whiteness, I focus on the first two groups, those who are always or sometimes seen as White, to analyze experiences of Whiteness as wage and tax.

I conducted interviews from 2021 to 2023, recording audio and video data through Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and maintained this virtual format for consistency, with participants' consent. I transcribed interviews primarily using video recordings, making note of body language and facial expressions within transcripts. Data analysis drew on a combination of abductive and flexible coding approaches (Deterding and Waters 2018; Timmermans and Tavory 2012), focusing first on responses to questions about how individuals are perceived by others (What race do others seem to view you as? Do other people ever perceive you as White?)

and their identification with Whiteness (To what extent do you identify as White?). Follow-up questions elicited participants' interpretations of these experiences (What does this mean to you?) and emotional reactions (How do you feel about this?). Through codes and analytic memos, I identified White privilege and conflicting emotions around this privilege as salient themes, which I coded further for specific types. An interview question on whether individuals felt they experienced challenges related to their multiracial identity also proved fruitful for this analysis. Participants frequently dismissed their challenges as merely psychological or internal, even when interviews included accounts of clearly distressing events. This contradiction led me to reconsider Du Bois's "public and psychological wage," and develop the concept of a tax on the White wage. The majority of participants in this analytic sample of 37 (those who reported that they are *only* or *can be* seen as White) reported experiencing Whiteness as a wage (78%), a contingent status (89%), and a tax (81%). Below, I discuss findings around multiracial individuals' experiences of Whiteness as wage, contingent status, and tax.

FINDINGS

Recognition as White: Whiteness as a Wage and Contingent Status

Multiracial individuals, particularly those who are interpreted as White by others, report receiving a White wage, defined as forms of compensation, which may be material or psychological, granted to individuals who are interpreted as White. The "wages" of Whiteness include experiences of White privilege, commonly understood as unearned benefits received for being interpreted as White. However, the concept of "White wages" first put forth Du Bois (1935), acknowledges the interconnected nature of racism, capitalism, and White supremacy. I find that multiracial individuals who appear White to others *most* or *some* of the time, experience

Whiteness as a wage in the following ways: 1) through general but abstract understandings, 2) in the context of political climate and recent events, and 3) in the context of police encounters.

General Understandings of Privilege. When asked "How much do other people view you as White?" some participants immediately linked being perceived as White to privilege. Ana (21 years old, Latiné/White[4]) responded: "I'd have to say 100% for myself, yeah. …Honestly, I think it's a privilege." Similarly, Georgia (20, Asian/White) shared, "I do get to enjoy some White privilege because people don't think twice when they see me… I feel like I fit in pretty well with White people." While Ana's account is vague, Georgia touches on a mixture of public and psychological benefits. Being able to "fit in" allows Georgia a degree of psychological comfort in that she doesn't have to worry that White peers or strangers will other her. She goes on to describe an understanding of Whiteness as occupying a default status: "I guess Whiteness in America is usually like the default race. When somebody is…telling a story and they explain somebody, they don't mention their race. Usually most people think of a White person." She concludes, "the big thing about White identity is that you're just like the default I guess." Georgia understands the benefits of White appearance as not only psychological, but operating as a status, as the assumed default race in the United States that doesn't require explanation. Whiteness acts as a public status in that it doesn't require any acknowledgement or discussion of race.

Political Climate. Other participants understood their experiences with White privilege in the context of specific political issues and events. For Ava (18, White/Latiné), anti-immigrant actions, such as targeted ICE raids, provided a context in which she understood herself to be privileged. Describing her own appearance, Ava explains, "I very much do not look mixed. So I think that I have not really experienced any like prejudice or anything because I look like fully White." Much like Ana and Georgia in the section above, Ava first expresses a general

understanding of White privilege, associating it with a lack of prejudice based on her physical appearance. She goes on to say, “I would identify as Latina, but I also know that, like my sympathy goes out for more Latina, Latino people than me, if that makes sense. Like, if there's controversy about Hispanics or Latinos, I know I'm probably in the clear.” Ava applies her understanding of White privilege as a lack of experience with prejudice to a specific context. Having previously discussed the increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric during the Trump administration, Ava notes that a “controversy about Hispanics or Latinos” is unlikely to shape her own personal experiences, but rather those who are “more Latina [or] Latino,” meaning those who have a darker skin tone or who may have two Latiné parents, rather than one, as she does.

Police Encounters. Multiple multiracial young adults developed understandings of their own White privilege through police encounters, describing instances when they were not treated harshly or did not feel they needed to fear the police, compared to others. Police encounters were understood by these young adults as moments with a high potential for racial discrimination and/or violence, which may have felt especially stark in the wake of 2020. Viral, violent videos recording police interactions with Black and Brown Americans, often with lethal consequences, as well as nation-wide protests against racist police violence following the murder of George Floyd, were highly salient parts of participants’ high school or early college years. Participants commonly discussed being made aware of their White privilege through police encounters. Multiracial young adults who could appear White at least some of the time understood themselves as privileged compared to non-White family members, peers, and abstract generalized others. Charlotte (18, White, Latiné/Latiné), described a tense moment in which her mother, who is Mexican and White, typically racialized as White, and was undocumented at the time, was pulled over by the police, but benefited from the wages of Whiteness:

> She messed up, so they stopped her. They asked for license and registration. My mom didn't have a license. And it was like, at the heat of [anti-immigrant sentiment], like we were still in 2016. So it was 17 minutes of just, like- crap! Crap! You know? …She did have a thing that said that she used to have a license, before it ran out and whatever. There was no policy to renew it, due to her status. And the policeman was looking at it. And he looked at her. And he was like, "Ok I'll just give you off with a warning." [sic] "Excuse me?" So when it comes to that, my mom was like, she would talk about it. She's like, "See, even if I hate it…" She did feel guilty of like, "Simply because I was White, that policeman let us go."

In this moment, Charlotte described White privilege being so powerful that her mother gets off with a warning, even when she has an expired license, echoing the experiences of undocumented Brazilian immigrants perceived as White (Cebulko 2021). She discusses this privilege with her mother, who conveys guilt about the experience, as they presumably understand that others in the same position who do not appear White would not have been let off with only a warning. In the interview, Charlotte concludes, "It's really about your skin color." Charlotte's experience underscores Beltrán's (2020) arguments that Whiteness functions as a political project and "a mass-based, participatory practice of exclusion and performative membership with one's fellow (white) citizens" (19). Perceiving Charlotte's mother as White, the policeman engages in performative membership that grants leniency, rather than cruelty or violence.

While Charlotte and her mother have a police encounter that is tied to immigration and legal status, Camila (21, White/Latiné, White) understands her White privilege during police encounters as relative to Black and other people of color. Camila's mother is White and her father is biracial with White and Mexican parents, so Camila has one-quarter of Mexican ancestry. She describes herself as being seen as White "100 percent of the time… unless somebody's given a reason to question my ethnicity." Camila's ancestry or ethnicity come up in situations when she is with her father, who is typically racialized as Latiné and in her words, seen

as “big and Brown.” Camila’s understanding of White privilege is shaped by the contrast between the experiences of herself, her father, and her non-White friends.

Camila reported multiple instances in which her White privilege allowed not only her but her Black and Brown friends to make it through police encounters unscathed. She explains, “I've been the person who's the only White person in the car getting pulled over by cops, and I've gotten out of it and my friends will turn to me and say, ‘Thank you for being here. That wouldn't have gone that way [without you here].’” She emphasizes, “Many times. Like getting trouble in high school, sneaking around and going where you’re not supposed to and it's- I could talk it out [with police] and then it wouldn't have gone that way, if I wasn't there.” Camila concludes, “That's always a stark reminder of how different life is for people who aren't White or don't look White. ...I'm reminded that my life is very, very, very different than it would be if I looked more like my dad.” For Camila, police encounters spark reflection on the benefits she receives from appearing White. Like Charlotte’s mom, who discussed feeling guilt from receiving benefits and leniency simply for appearing White, Camila is both conflicted and frustrated about the wages she receives, particularly as she sees that these wages are not granted to others, and in the case of her father, withheld even from a member of her own family.

Finally, Margaret’s (21, Asian/White) account offers additional insight into how police encounters may act as racializing experiences in the opposite direction. Margaret, who has a Cambodian mother and White father, tentatively describes herself as able to be seen as White, sharing, “I think it is a yes, but it's like a very, very shallow yes.” She goes on to break down various features, including her “tan” skin tone, eye shape, dark hair, and brown eyes, concluding that it is possible, but not very common, for others to interpret her as White. Margaret experiences race and Whiteness in contrast to her brother, noting “my oldest brother is pretty

dark. He's a lot darker than I am." After the 2014 police murder of Michael Brown, Margaret described her White father's concern in "recognizing that, my kids are Brown in this country and that can be dangerous." As a result, her father gave Margaret and her brother the "police talk" (Dow 2016; Malone Gonzalez 2019), leaving Margaret with the understanding that "he was really afraid that something was going to happen to us. Or that something could happen to us just because, like we're not White." Unfortunately, Margaret shared that her father's fears were validated shortly after this conversation: "My brother got pulled over one time—everyone speeds on that street but like, he was going pretty fast. He just got off with a warning, but on the warning, it did say that he was Black. Like the cop put down that he was Black." While Margaret's brother walked away from this police encounter unharmed, her family was alarmed to see the police officer had interpreted him as Black, despite having no Black ancestry. Police encounters provide little room for racial identity nuance and highlight Black-White racial divides, communicating who has guaranteed access to White privilege and who does not.

Whiteness as a Contingent Status

As suggested by Margaret's account, Whiteness and the wages it may confer are contingent on one being interpreted as White by others, an interpretation that is not consistently guaranteed for multiracial individuals. As Charlotte (White, Latiné/Latiné) mentions above, interpretations of her skin tone, as well as her racial and ethnic ancestries, are subject to change based on context, in line with Sims' (2016) identification of inconsistent racial appraisals as a common, consistent experience for multiracial individuals. Charlotte initially describes herself as being seen as White by others "50 percent" of the time. Yet she goes on discuss how, alongside her much lighter-skinned sister, she is perceived as "dark." However, around her Mexican extended family, she is teased for being White, revealing how access to Whiteness varies even

within family contexts. Charlotte herself understands her ability to be seen as White as "so contextual," underscoring the impact of reflected appraisals for multiracial people (Khanna 2004; Sims 2016).

Outside of family contexts, the contingent nature of Whiteness can operate in more malicious ways. After the 2016 election of Trump, Charlotte and her family discussed the potential for increased danger and racist violence, recognizing that both one's immediate context and the broader political climate shape how skin tone is interpreted, including whether an individual is seen as White. While she knows she appears White to others at least some of the time, Charlotte later questions her own assessment: "I cannot really say 50/50. Because it's like, really, I never know how I'm gonna be treated. It depends on how racist people are." Her reevaluation cuts to the core of one challenge experienced by multiracial individuals who have *some* access to Whiteness. Charlotte can never be completely sure of when she will be viewed as White and when she will not, leaving her to grapple with a high level of uncertainty.

Other participants echoed this uncertainty. When asked if she felt she had ever experienced racism, Lily (18, White, Asian/Asian) responded, "Lots of times. …Even if someone's not *always* [racist] to me, I have a fear that they *will* be when they see me" (emphasis added). Lily's mother is biracial with Middle Eastern and European ancestry and her father is Middle Eastern. At times, Lily also wears a head scarf. Her fears about how others will see her are tied to both her appearance and dress. While interpretations of her appearance may be inconsistent, and include interpretations of her as White, her head scarf is more likely to remove her access to Whiteness, heightening her fear of experiencing racism.

Whiteness can also operate as a contingent status in the same context over time. Amelia (20, White/Asian) shared a particularly stressful experience that demonstrated the limits of her

access to Whiteness. Amelia has a White mother and Pakistani father, and reported being seen as White 15 percent of the time and only "at first glance." She is most commonly interpreted as Latina or Middle Eastern. However, until an incident in high school Amelia described herself as identifying as White "90 percent of the time." Amelia introduced the situation as such: "My, I guess you could say best friend at the time…we had a falling out…And she took that in turn to attack my ethnicity, I guess, and make very racist comments. Not to my face, but to other people." Giving an example, Amelia shared: "I did track in high school. After school I would grab my track bag from my car and I guess she made some comment about like, 'Oh, are there bombs in there?' to other people." Amelia described her reaction to this scenario as a mild annoyance, but went on to share that these racist comments accumulated and ultimately changed her understanding of race: "That was kind of when I was like, Oh, like, this is something that people see and people can attack me for… And I guess she was the one who kind of made me self-conscious about it a lot, because she made comments about things like, specifically pertaining to my Brown ethnicity. Like how much hair I had." Amelia's experience is a particularly stark example of the contingent nature of Whiteness. Within a quick span of time, she shifted from viewing herself as "90 percent" White, to realizing that her race was an aspect of her identity that could be used for malicious attacks. Amelia experienced a very sudden, blatant racialization and an understanding that being Brown, in her words, could be seen as negative. This realization led her to also understand previous experiences with her White peers as racialized interactions that had pushed her to identify as White and minimize her "Brown" ancestry.

Fortunately, in the aftermath of this falling out with her friend, Amelia shifted how she viewed herself and sought out different networks. She concluded this experience by sharing:

> I would say my high school experience got slightly better after that. My friend group became very diverse after that. I had a friend who was also mixed, but she was White and Black. So she kind of understood a lot of the same things that I did- not to the same degree because, like, obviously, her Black ethnicity posed other issues for her than my Brown did. One of my friends was from Bangladesh and then I had another friend who was just like fully African American. And so it was kind of like nice in that aspect that I had other people who understood what it was like to go to a school where you looked around and it was very White.

For Amelia, the realization that her Whiteness was a contingent status was painful but led to a racial consciousness that drew her to peers of color, with whom she shared a sense of solidarity.

The toll taken on multiracial individuals who experience Whiteness as contingent should not be underestimated. Although these young adults benefit from a "public and psychological wage" at times, the inconsistency of this wage is detrimental, as multiracial individuals enter interactions and circumstances uncertain of whether they will be granted access to the "default" White race or racialized in a negative light. Some, like Lily, chose to forgo any sense of White identity as a result. Other young adults like Amelia may still be in the process of determining how to navigate this uncertainty. She describes "White culture" through traditions such as enjoying corn on the cob at bonfires, and notes, "I also try and keep that as well," while simultaneously identifying as and understanding she is racialized as Brown. The contingent nature of Whiteness for multiracial individuals, who occupy multiple racial identities or communities, acts as a manifestation of monoracism (Johnston and Nadal 2010). However, multiracial young adults in this study also experienced what I conceptualize as a "tax" or costs specifically tied to their ability to be seen as White.

Identification as White: Whiteness as a Tax and Morally Fraught Identity

If Whiteness operates as a wage, then for multiracial individuals who have partial, complex, or unclear access to Whiteness, this wage is tempered by a tax. I define this *tax on the White wage* as costs experienced by individuals who are interpreted as White, which lessen or

counteract benefits from the White wage. Du Bois (1935) conceptualized Whiteness as both a "public and psychological wage" with the former referring to concrete benefits and resources accrued under racial capitalism, and the latter referring primarily to the benefit of status (Myers 2022). In his context, Du Bois referred to the status that poor and working-class White Americans retained over recently freed Black Americans during Reconstruction. Although the conditions of multiracial young adults in the U.S. today are quite different, they experience clear "wages" for appearing White, run into the limits of this wage as contingent, and finally, experience a tax, or consequences, for appearing White.

When asked whether they experienced any challenges for being multiracial, participants frequently spoke dismissively about their own challenges around identity, even when they appeared to reveal genuine struggles with multiraciality earlier in their interviews. Although most multiracial individuals communicated that they experience some form of psychological tax for being multiracial, they minimized these experiences as being merely "internal" or "inner challenges," even as some participants used strong language such as "identity crisis" or "personal turmoil." Instead, multiracial individuals compared their experiences to the blatant experiences with racism that their non-White monoracial counterparts might experience. Participants acknowledged a lack of experiences with clear and external racial discrimination, or less frequent experiences relative to others, as a way to acknowledge White or light-skinned privilege. However, participants did go on to describe concrete impacts of these "inner conflicts." While there are likely a wide range of ways Whiteness may function as a "tax," multiracial individuals in this study most commonly reported experiences with 1) challenges to authenticity and belonging, and 2) vicarious racism.

Challenges to Authenticity and Belonging. Multiracial experiences with challenges to authenticity and belonging, particularly regarding their non-White ancestry or ancestries, is a commonly reported experience (Bettez 2011; Johnston and Nadal 2010; Khanna 2011a; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Wright, Longerbeam, and Alagaraja 2022). Below, I focus on cases in which an interpretation of multiracial individuals as *White* leads to such challenges, as well as the various ways in which young adults process and cope with these challenges to their sense of identity.

Georgia (20, Asian/White) speaks explicitly about the challenges she feels around authenticity and belonging. Georgia has Filipino and White ancestry, and reports that she is seen as White around 75 percent of the time, and seen as Asian 25 percent, but that the latter estimate refers to people seeing her as "a mix of both," rather than "full Asian." While Georgia identifies with both sides of her ancestry, she does acknowledge that her appearance causes a mismatch between how she identifies and how she is perceived by others. She shared, "I guess I kind of wish that I looked more like half. Yeah, but it's whatever. But sometimes I do feel like I have to explain myself or justify it." While she is not distressed about her appearance, Georgia does note the need to "justify" her Asian or Filipino identity. She identifies her Filipino identity as "more important," in part because she feels that "there's more to my Filipino culture side" compared to her father's White family.

Shelby (18, White/Black) reported feeling so unsure of the authenticity of her Black identity and the degree to which she could experience belonging that she considered embracing only a White identity. However, she described a community of Black peers who validated her as authentically Black and helped foster a sense of belonging: "I even talked to my friends about it. …I used to literally be like, 'Oh, I act so White. I should just be White passing or something, like

I should just commit to it.' …and they were like, 'You are Black. You should just accept who you are. You don't necessarily need to fit into the standards of it.'" Shelby's experience confirms racial appraisals research that has found multiracial individuals may internalize others' perceptions of their race and go on to question the authenticity of their own identities (Khanna 2004; Sims 2016), a long-standing pattern echoed more broadly in identity theory (Cooley 1922; Stets and Burke 2000). However, supportive social networks that promote an expansive view of racial/ethnic authenticity, also discussed as "pull" factors (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008), can mitigate the doubts of participants like Shelby and promote a sense of belonging.

Unlike Shelby, Gabriel (age 21, White, Asian/Latiné) did not rely on supportive peers, but developed strategies akin to code-switching (Anderson 2000) to mitigate this particular tax of Whiteness. Explaining his approach, Gabriel says:

> I kind of accepted that, well, in order to kind of move through life without setting up impediments for myself, I'm going to have to kind of adapt. … I would act more White than I am to fit in. Because there's a lot, a lot of White students here [at my university].
>
> Interviewer: Can you think of some of the things that you do, or what it means to you, to act White?
>
> Gabriel: A lot of it is omission. I think a lot more about what I'm going to say before I say it. If they do ask me like, "Hey, like what's your favorite food? Like what food did you grow up with?" I'll be like, "Burgers."

Gabriel goes on to share that when he brings up foods like enchiladas or Mexican chiles, "People will try to gatekeep it. Like, 'Well, you look White, so why are you having those foods? Where were you having those growing up? Were you- are your parents trying to fake being, like uh, eurgh… [stumbles and trails off]" The frustration in Gabriel's experiences is clear, as he suggests that others have even accused his parents of faking their ancestries. Rather than repeatedly confront the harm from these microaggressions, Gabriel chooses to tell others he likes burgers or

hot dogs. Gabriel concluded, “After a certain point, um… I must have gotten tired of being told like I'm not… who I am.”

By contrast, Gabriel has different experiences around other Latiné people. “When I'm around my Latino peers, I don't have to do that as much. I can tap more into the Latino or Chicano side of my family. …I can just be me. I don't have to focus on, I guess appealing to what people expect based on what you look like.” It is this contrast that makes it clear that Gabriel’s code-switching strategy may avoid short-term microaggressions but may weigh on him long-term. His case also suggests that the experience of Whiteness as a tax is not experienced evenly across contexts, but varies, in this case, primarily based on the racial makeup of and degree of support from his peers.

Vicarious Racism. Another tax experienced by multiracial individuals is vicarious racism, or “cases in which people of color indirectly experience racism that is targeted at other persons of color in their environment” (Truong, Museus, and McGuire 2016:227). Vicarious racism can also occur through “observation and report” (Harrell 2000), meaning that an individual need not witness the racist incident directly to feel its effects. Prominent research in this area documents the harmful impacts of vicarious racism through anti-Black police violence, on both mental health (Malone Gonzalez, Buggs, and Jackson 2025) and physical health through illness (Sewell et al. 2021). Multiracial individuals can experience vicarious racism regardless of whether they are interpreted as White. These individuals may even experience vicarious racism more frequently than those who are not seen as White, since they also witness instances of backstage racism, which take place in monoracial White settings (Picca and Feagin 2007), or in this case, settings perceived as White. Multiracial individuals may inadvertently act as infiltrators in spaces assumed to be all-White, as was the case with Sonia.

Sonia (20, Asian/White) reported two notable experiences witnessing backstage racism during her interview. In the first, she described a time when her roommate hosted friends in their shared suite:

> So I was kinda in one room and the door was open. And they had friends over and they were- they said something about like, Asian people like eating dog and just really dumb stuff like that and I was just like, hmm [tilts head]. I guess maybe they don't… either they don't care or they don't know… there have been a couple incidents where I'll hear someone make a comment, not directed at me, but it's about Asian people or just people of color in general.

She speculates, "maybe they think it's okay to say it because they don't know what my background is." When asked about her reactions in these situations, Sonia shared another incident.

> So I can't say I'm proud of the way I reacted. …I used to work in retail in high school. And my coworker… we were both working the register. And there was this [customer], I think they were Chinese because they were speaking Chinese. They asked if they could get a price adjustment because there was a thread hanging out or there was something wrong with the clothes. And then after they left, like my coworker was like, 'oh, why do Asian people always try to bargain?' …I didn't say anything. …I wish I had said something but I guess maybe it shows how she might have perceived me. Maybe she didn't think I was… or she didn't realize that I was also Asian.

In both cases, Sonia concludes that the reason she witnessed these racist remarks is due to her White appearance. While Sonia may have experienced aspects of White privilege due to her appearance, this same appearance brought her into contact with uncomfortable experiences of backstage racism. In the latter scenario with her coworker, and in the context of recounting this story during an interview, Sonia relays a sense of guilt for not speaking out, which compounds the psychological tax she had already experienced from these encounters with vicarious racism.

Claire (18, Latiné/White) recounted experiences of vicarious racism from her father's White extended family, directed at her Colombian mother. When asked about experiences with her White extended family, Claire described them with phrases like "I don't wanna say racist, but

they're like, very White." and "I would say a little bit like White supremacist." She went on to give an emotional account of how "they always treated my mom very like lesser than." Although these instances of mistreatment took place years ago, while Claire attended middle school, she grew emotional and teary during the interview.

Harrell (2000) describes the consequences of vicarious racism as creating "anxiety, a heightened sense of danger/vulnerability, anger, and sadness, among other emotional and psychological reactions. These vicarious experiences can also teach valuable lessons about the places where racism hides and resides." Both Claire and Sonia communicate varying degrees of distress as they recounted their experiences with vicarious racism. Both also conclude their accounts by expressing a determination to prevent such incidents in the future, with Claire declaring "I'm ready to fight. Like if they said anything when I was older, I'd fight." In a more subdued manner, Sonia shared, "hopefully I won't encounter that situation again. But if I do, I feel like I would be ready to say something." These experiences caused distress, but did indeed reveal to multiracial young adults "the places where racism hides and resides."

Discussion and Conclusion

Multiracial individuals' experiences with Whiteness are characterized by privilege (wage), uncertainty (contingent status), and harm (tax), shaped by underlying moral tensions about what it means to be White. While the wages of Whiteness or White privilege have been seen as exclusive to monoracial White individuals, this study and a growing body of research demonstrate that others may also access these benefits (Cebulko 2021, Waring 2023). Multiracial young adults experienced wages through the safety afforded by Whiteness in social situations, racially charged political contexts, and police encounters. However, their access to White privilege is accompanied by a *psychological tax*, including challenges to authenticity and

belonging, experiences of vicarious racism, and unreliable access, which I describe as a contingent status. The wages of Whiteness vary by context, leaving multiracial individuals who occupy a "racially ambiguous" position with an additional mental burden. These experiences speak to how multiracial individuals navigate and are shaped by Whiteness as a system, which is nested within a monoracial paradigm that paints Whiteness as exclusive.

Rather than focusing on the sweeping question of whether multiracials individuals are "becoming White" (Alba 2020; Bonilla-Silva 2004) or not (Chong and Song 2022; Jones and Frank 2023), this study reveals some of the complexity within the meanings of Whiteness and how it is experienced by multiracial Americans. This shift enables scholars to consider how individuals are constrained by or free to operate within Whiteness as a social structure, and to what degree the meanings of Whiteness are stable or changing.

Multiracial young adults today navigate Whiteness in ways that indicate how race operates, whether changing or lying stagnant. While these young adults remain constrained by Whiteness, receiving wages and taxes outside of their control, they also witness how current constructions of race are insufficient to capture their experiences. Race and Whiteness are contingent, rather than consistently applied aspects of their lives. This generation has also come of age in the wake of multiple, nation-wide racial reckonings: anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric sparked by the Trump administration, viral police murders of Black and Brown Americans and corresponding protests, a COVID-19-related wave of anti-Asian violence, and increasingly visible White supremacist movements and actions such as the Charleston march and January 6th storming of the U.S. Capitol. Having grown up in a racial climate that has fostered a heightened awareness of race and its clear connection to racism, multiracial young adults may more readily acknowledge their privileges, feel greater distress and guilt about taxes like

vicarious racism, and feel more conflicted about whether they "should" claim Whiteness. There remains ample research to be done examining how the recent racial climate in the U.S. has shaped understandings and experiences with race, particularly for new generations.

Finally, the study of multiraciality through critical frameworks that acknowledge monoracism holds potential for researchers more broadly. Race scholars consistently strive to study race in ways that do not reify the notion of mutually exclusive, biological categories. Yet a monoracial paradigm has made this reification all too easy. Rather than "becoming White" or adding to a "majority-minority" future, multiracial individuals hold multiple racial identities simultaneously, consider the moral meanings of these identities, and must navigate others' monoracial interpretations of their race and the broader "monoracial imperative" (Daniel 2021) embedded within U.S. society. Applying a "multiracial paradigm" to research may also be fruitful: a White/non-White color line undoubtedly persists and perpetuates inequalities, *and* multiracial experiences with race complicate and blur this color line. The mere existence of multiracial people certainly does not "solve racism" nor indicate automatic racial progress but perhaps changing the lens through which we analyze race, from a monoracial paradigm to a multiracial one, can offer a meaningful step forward.

End Notes

1. Throughout this text, I capitalize both Black and White, offering them linguistic treatment akin to Asian and Latiné. While some scholars choose to capitalize Black and not White as a reversal of power, I adhere to Ewing's (2020) call to capitalize White to disrupt its still-too-common treatment as invisible, default, or the norm.

2. I use "multiracial" as an umbrella term referring to individuals who have parents of two or more racial ancestries, encompassing biracial identities and not necessarily indicating that an individual identifies with the term "multiracial." My use of the term "multiracial" aligns most closely with Morning's (2014) specification that "two or more racial ancestries" should refer to ancestries that are "currently believed to constitute distinct races" (10). However, since racial categories shift over time, I include identities that may still be "emerging" in terms of public recognition, such as MENA (Middle Eastern and North African)/Arab American.

3. Although in the U.S., Latino/a/é is measured as an ethnicity distinct from race, I also include individuals with Latiné ancestries, given that Latiné Americans are often racialized in distinct ways, and may also be racialized differently even when occupying the same Latiné ethnic group. Overall, I use Latiné as a gender-neutral term but specify participants' chosen language in direct quotes or when discussing their specific experiences.

4. Throughout the findings I list participants' racial ancestries as Mother's ancestry/Father's ancestry. A participant who has a White mother and Black father will be listed as White/Black, while a participant who has an Asian mother and White father is listed as Asian/White. I do so to avoid prioritizing Whiteness or imposing norms of hypodescent/one-drop rule.

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Chapter 2:

"I love him, but sometimes he doesn't understand race":

The Hidden Labor of Children in Multiracial Families

Multiracial children perform hidden labor in their families by engaging in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents and other family members. This socialization can take multiple forms, including sharing general information about race and racism; information about a specific racial or ethnic ancestry, particularly with family members who do not share that ancestry; and/or information on what it is like to be multiracial, particularly how multiracial experiences may differ from monoracial ones. However, children do not freely engage in this kind of labor even if they view it as necessary. Given that parents hold more power and authority in parent-child relationships, children must make calculations about when it is effective, worthwhile, and safe to engage in the socialization of their parents and family members. Below, I outline the forms of ethnic-racial socialization performed by children, when they attempt to engage in this socialization, and why they do so. I conclude with a discussion of the importance of children's socialization practices for social reproduction and generational change.

Bidirectional Ethnic-Racial Socialization

Ethnic-racial socialization can be defined as the transmission of information regarding race and ethnicity between adults and children (Hughes et al. 2006; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020). There are a few key differences in how these processes may play out in multiracial versus monoracial families. Monoracial parents start from a shared baseline with their children. That is, they hold ideas and assumptions about how their children will experience race based on their own lived experiences. Children in monoracial families may still experience race differently from parents of the same ethnic-racial ancestry, since experiences with race may change across

generations, based on factors like the racial composition of neighborhoods and schools, generational changes in norms around race and ethnicity, and changes to racial climate on local, state, and/or national levels. However, despite these changing conditions, monoracial parents hold ideas of what it means to be Black, White, Asian, etc., based on their lived experiences. Within multiracial families, monoracial parents of multiracial children do not begin from the same baseline. Parents may lack knowledge of 1) race and racism generally, particularly if they have not perceived race to be a salient part of their lives, 2) a specific racial or ethnic ancestry held by their child but not them, or 3) multiracial-specific experiences. How then, do families engage in ethnic-racial socialization in light of these differing lived experiences?

Individuals arrive at parenthood with a wide range of preparation levels to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their children and implement a range of socialization approaches accordingly. Most ethnic-racial socialization falls into two broad categories: 1) bias preparation, which is focused on teaching about and mitigating harm from racism; and 2) cultural socialization, which is focused on identity and pride (Hughes et al. 2006; Rollins and Hunter 2013). Additional approaches to ethnic-racial socialization are 3) color-evasive messages, focused on deemphasizing the impact of race and stressing individual development over group solidarity, and 4) silence, in which race and racism are not discussed between parents and children (Rollins and Hunter 2013). White parents of multiracial children do engage in the full range of socialization types (O'Donoghue 2005; Reich 2002) but are more likely than other groups to take color-evasive and "silent" approaches to ethnic-racial socialization, compared to Black parents (Katz and Kofkin 1997; Rollins and Hunter 2013). Thus, within multiracial families with one White parent and one parent of color, it is often assumed that the parent of color will engage in adequate ethnic-racial socialization, even if the White parent does not.

However, multiracial children's experiences are likely to differ from both parents in some way, whether due to physical appearance, lived experiences, diverse family connections, or other factors. Finally, despite assumptions to the contrary, parents and other family members may also hold racist beliefs and perpetuate racism within their own multiracial families (Atkin and Jackson 2021; Campion and Lewis 2022; Mehta 2023; Waring 2025). In the face of socialization approaches that may not adequately address race and multiraciality, and varied understandings of racism, how do multiracial children navigate race within their own families?

Ethnic-racial socialization has been acknowledged as a bidirectional process (Hughes et al. 2006; Song 2019), in which socialization takes place not only through parents teaching their children about race and ethnicity, but through children who, in their own ways, also teach or socialize their parents. In short, parents and children learn from each other. Empirical research on multiracial families has understandably focused on how monoracial parents engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their multiracial children. Within both society at large and academic scholarship, we operate from a definition of childhood that most commonly paints children as passive recipients of knowledge shared by adults (Corsaro 1992; García-Sánchez 2018; Pugh 2014). One exception is Song's (2019) study of how multiracial individuals who become parents themselves change the ways they think about race and identity after having children. This research remains novel as it is one of the few that examines multiracial individuals' experiences as parents, an area of study only likely to grow as a greater portion of the multiracial population have their own children. Yet, there is still empirical research to be done on ethnic-racial socialization between monoracial parents and their multiracial children. Absent from these accounts are cases in which children actively teach their parents about race and racism, particularly as they enter adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Childhood Agency

As mentioned in the previous section, in the public imagination, children have been treated as passive recipients of knowledge, who absorb norms, cultures, and attitudes from adults and social institutions around them. A shift to what is sometimes called the "new sociology of childhood" instead argues that children are active and agentic actors worthy of study independent of the family, who create and operate within their own rich social worlds (Corsaro 1992; García-Sánchez 2018; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Pugh 2014; Waldren and Kaminski 2012). To prioritize children's own voices and agency, some researchers turn to arts-based methods, such as integrations of photovoice and illustrations into or in addition to interviews with children (Kaplan 2013; Mishra et al. 2017; Templeton and Vellanki 2022; Vega 2023).

At the same time, children's agency is limited or must be enacted around structural constraints and power imbalances, with respect to parents, families, and adults in general (Brannen and O'Brien 1996; Jensen and McKee 2002; Seymour and McNamee 2012). Ultimately, scholars within this subfield acknowledge the interlocked nature of agency and structure in children's lives; that is, studies of children's agency must engage in the limits of this agency and how they are shaped by adult worlds and institutions such as family and schools.

Children develop their own strategies to navigate adults' social systems. Research with respect to the children of immigrants has been particularly attentive to the ways children engage in different types of labor for the sake of their family unit. Bloemraad and Trost (2008) find that the children of immigrants participate in the *political* socialization of their parents, drawing on English language skills and access to political information not necessarily shared by their parents. As a result, children's efforts can increase political engagement for their whole family. Kwon (2024) examines how children of immigrants act as "language brokers," providing English

translations for their parents in a wide range of social institutions, from hospitals to police stations. Rather than viewing children's labor as "parentification," "adultification," or role reversal, children contributing their skills and knowledge as they age, and participating in family life differently as they do so, can be understood as part of a natural stage of the "family life cycle" (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002). As part of bidirectional political socialization, children have a "trickle-up influence" that influences parents' beliefs and actions (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002), as well as the potential for broader societal impact, as in the case of the 2006 mass mobilizations for immigrant rights (Bloemraad and Trost 2008). The examples above focus on the children of immigrants, who may be able to adapt to the norms, cultures, and policies of a new country more quickly than adults and in turn, share this information with parents. While children may engage in political socialization within any family type, these dynamics may be more observable and salient in immigrant families. Similarly, bidirectional *racial* socialization occurs to varying degrees and formats in all families, but multiracial families serve as a particularly observable and salient case, as family members occupy different racial positions.

Existing literature on bidirectional ethnic-racial socialization of multiracial children has been limited to theoretical discussions (Hughes et al. 2006) or empirical research on "passive" forms of socialization, such as when parents change the way they think about and engage with race as a result of having multiracial children (Song 2019). Thus, this study's contribution lies in the integration of childhood agency into racial socialization literatures, to consider not only the ways children's agency is limited by typical constraints placed on children from adults, but also by structural constraints and expectations placed on multiracial families, such as multiracial progress narratives.

(Multi) Racial Progress Narratives

Racial progress narratives can be defined as the belief that racial equality will naturally increase over time and racism will decrease accordingly. This idea, more akin to a myth or fallacy, has been critiqued for its ahistorical nature, disregarding how social progress has been hard-won, non-linear, and the result of continued resistance and organized social movements (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Ray 2022). *Multiracial* progress narratives operate from similar logics but rely on misplaced assumptions about the multiracial population. The growth of the multiracial population—276 percent between 2010 and 2020 (Jones and Bullock 2013)—has been the subject of much speculation about the future of race in the U.S. The cover of a 1993 issue of *Time* magazine featured a computer-generated image that combined multiple racial ancestries into one woman's face, intended as a prediction of the "average" physical appearance of future Americans (Thai 1993). Twenty years later, in 2013, *National Geographic* featured "The Race Card Project," a portraiture series featuring biracial Americans of varying racial ancestries, accompanied by text speculation on America's impending multiracial future (Norris 2013). Although White nationalist groups perceive this demographic shift as a threat, the mainstream, prevailing discourse on the growing multiracial population is superficially celebratory. For example, narratives around Tiger Woods offer a particularly poignant example. Encouraged in part by Woods's own parents, media coverage of Woods depicted him as a post-racial golden child and the future of race in America (Washington 2017; Yu 2003). Tiger Woods has received attention in particular for his moniker "Cablinasian," a phrase now commonly cited in sociology textbooks, and what I would describe as a catchy "racial elevator speech" (Heilman 2022) used to describe his Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian ancestry. Yet, multiracial progress narratives have not been proven true. Neither the growing multiracial population nor a biracial U.S. president has fulfilled the promise of a post-racial America.

Nonetheless, narratives attached to multiracial individuals reveal much about current constructions of race. In her analysis of Black-Asian multiracial public figures, communications and ethnic studies scholar Myra Washington (2017) analyzes these "post-racial" narratives attached to Tiger Woods further, calling out assumptions that multiracial or mixed-race people are inherently "resistant to dominant paradigms of race and racism" (11). Drawing instead on Leslie Bow's work to analyze multiracial bodies as "sites of cultural disruption" that highlight the limits of racial categories (Bow 2009, 80, in Washington 2017, 11), Washington discusses "Blasian" celebrity identities as a "brand" that plays off post-racial expectations to navigate the celebrity industrial culture. Blasian celebrities reveal the limits of race, while simultaneously engaging with racialized expectations imposed upon Black, Asian, and multiracial individuals. Sociological research on multiracial families underscores these concepts in different ways. Katherine Johnson (2024b) discusses the multiracial family as an "anomaly" that runs counter to the commonplace assumptions about race, family, and physical appearance. As a result, multiracial family members navigate both racial stereotypes (Johnson 2024a) and manifestations of monoracism (Johnson 2024b) together. While examinations of how multiracial families resist racist and monoracist systems are not new (DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Twine 2011), experiences of racism *within* multiracial families are notable, in part because they challenge the post-racial ideals and assumptions attached to multiracial families (Campion and Lewis 2022; Mehta 2023; Mills 2017; Waring 2025). Families may navigate racism together; they may just as often perpetuate racism against their own members. When this takes place, how do families and in particular multiracial children, respond?

In this chapter, I show how multiracial individuals engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents, examine when children do or do not engage in this socialization, and end on a discussion of children's motivations for this labor.

FINDINGS

Children's Ethnic-Racial Socialization Messages

My data show that children engage in the direct ethnic-racial socialization of their parents on a few different levels:

1) children may teach either parent about race and racism in general (i.e., informing a parent that a view they expressed sounds racist and would not acceptable to say in public, even if the remark in question does not apply to any of the child's own ancestries);
2) children may teach a monoracial parent about a specific racial or ethnic identity that is not shared (i.e., a Black-White biracial child teaching a White parent about what it is like to be Black);
3) children may teach either parent about what is it like to be multiracial (i.e., asserting a mixed identity rather than a singular one; sharing experiences of monoracism).

General socialization on race and racism. At times, children talk to their parents about race and racism in general. Olivia (19), who has a White mother and Mexican father, shared, "I did have a few conversations with my mom about race because she's very like…[pause] I wouldn't say she's like, racist, but maybe a little bit. And I'm like, 'Dude, you can't be saying these things.' But it was never aimed at like… either of our races. It was usually aimed at other people. Which is weird. Like ugh." Olivia's White mother has never made disparaging comments about Olivia's own Mexican or Latiné identity. However, she expresses views on race that leave Olivia feeling uncomfortable, even as Olivia provides the disclaimer that her mother

isn't racist. As a result, Olivia corrects her mother in a general way, discouraging her mother from making stereotypical or derogatory remarks about other racial groups. Olivia doesn't report having any in-depth conversations about race and racism, nor explaining to her mother why those remarks make her uncomfortable. Olivia describes herself as not particularly politically engaged and does not appear to have reflected extensively on her identity. She notes that others seem to view her in wildly different ways, from biracial, to White, to a "woman of color," to which she adds "whatever that means." It is possible that Olivia, a first-year college student in her second semester, was not confident in her ability to fully articulate why her mother's remarks were inappropriate, in a convincing way.

Socialization on specific racial ancestries. Other participants report socializing their parents on the norms and experiences of a specific ethnic or racial ancestry not shared by that parent. Shelby (18), who has a White mother and Black father, corrects or polices her mother's language, with direct corrections like "Mom, you can't sing the N-word." She, like many Black/White biracial children, seems to find that her White parent views marriage or a relationship with a Black partner as a permission slip to engage in behaviors that would otherwise be seen as racist. Shelby sums up this scenario, noting "I felt like because we were mixed, she felt entitled to say it, but it wasn't her word to say."

While we might interpret Shelby's mother as being somewhat ignorant of issues around race and racism, multiracial children reported engaging in ethnic-racial socialization of their White parents even when that parent was described as progressive and understanding. Nina (18), who also has a White mother and Black father, began with a warm and glowing description of her mother: "My mom is aware that she's White and she's aware of her privilege." She adds, "She's not the stereotypical White mother of a Black child. …I don't know if you've seen it, but

I've always seen like on social media, they'll be like ohh, when White moms have Black kids, they say the N-word and they look like this and they act like this. And my mom doesn't act like that. Like, she's very aware that she is White and that her kids are Black." Nina distinguishes between White mothers like Shelby's and her own White mother, who she views as having a good understanding of race, racism, and how White and Black lived experiences in the U.S. differ. Still, Nina adds: "I'm kind of proud of her because she's come a long way. Because sometimes, she would say something. I'd be like *Mom*. I don't know. I don't know about that." Nina's account suggests that her mother begins from a more advanced baseline level of understanding about race, compared to Shelby's mother, but still has gone through growth over time. Nina appears to engage in similar racial socialization, though seemingly requiring less explanation. Simply saying "I don't know about that" appears to be enough for her mother to recognize when a remark is inappropriate. Nina also has two older siblings, a brother and sister. Given that Nina describes her older sister discussing race with her mother, it is also possible that her older siblings have already engaged in some racial socialization with their mother that has contributed to her mother being viewed by Nina as understanding and distinct from other White moms, or the "stereotypical White mother."

Socialization on multiracial experiences. Finally, participants also engaged in limited racial socialization about multiracial experiences. However, while I initially expected to find more cases of multiracial children socializing their monoracial parents on what it is like to be multiracial and how their experiences might differ, these cases were not as common or as clearly communicated as general messages on race and racism or specific monoracial ethnic ancestries. Multiracial socialization, or information communicated about the experiences that emerge from having multiple racial ancestries, differed in that these instances rarely took the form of explicit,

verbal socialization. Instead, these cases were more likely to take place through passive socialization or were entirely absent.

How Does Multiracial Socialization Take Place?

Although multiracial socialization is more limited than general socialization on race or monoracial ancestries, participants described a few different ways this process took place among their families. First, some multiracial families had general conversations about race that included discussions of multiracial experiences. In families where race was discussed openly, these conversations also were likely to include an acknowledgement of their children's multiple racial ancestries. For example, Malika (20) whose parents are Latina and Black, recounted conversations with her whole family, including her two multiracial siblings. While Malika did not describe her or her siblings as directly teaching their parents about race, they openly discussed how each of their experiences differed based on their skin tone and context, such as differing levels of ethnic-racial diversity across their schools and friend groups. Similarly, Malika's parents experience race differently. Although they are both people of color, they are racialized differently as Malika's mother is Mexican and Puerto Rican, while her father is Black. Thus, her parents can share general experiences such as being a racial minority in the workplace or experiencing racial discrimination but also recount differences specific to their ancestries. Overall, Malika and her family appear to ascribe to the idea that they should navigate life together as a family, rather than viewing their parents as complete authority figures who guide their children. Adding their class context, Malika describes how her parents both grew up "super poor" and came from "rough backgrounds." Thus, another dynamic that their family navigates together, as a family unit, is a middle-class lifestyle. Malika shares "no one's ever been in these positions before" and alludes to challenges as a result of class. It is possible that in some cases, the children of her family, who interact with middle-class peers at school, are more aware of

middle-class norms and expectations than their parents and can share these expectations at home. Similarly, Malika's family discusses experiences with race openly. In the context of conversations about George Floyd and Black Lives Matter in 2020, Malika expresses that although their experiences with race differ, her family was unified in that they were all "just trying to figure out how to be a minority in this world right now." In part, it is her parent's willingness to engage in "racial humility" (Green and Bryant 2023), both toward each other and their children, that makes these candid conversations possible.

Children also engaged in multiracial socialization by sharing their experiences with racial discrimination, racial microaggression, and/or monoracism with parents. While these cases align with parental socialization practices that involve sharing experiences of discrimination with children to engage in bias preparation, children did not typically report sharing their experiences with the goal of teaching their parents; rather, multiracial socialization was an unintended benefit. For example, Sonia (20) who is Indonesian and White, shared an experience when she had her language policed by others. When processing the experience with her White father, Sonia described him as "defensive" of her and saying, "you deserve to identify however you want!" Sonia doesn't report any instances of her father engaging in ethnic-racial or multiracial socialization prior to this interaction, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. By sharing this experience, Sonia seems to have inadvertently clued her father in to the ways multiracial people may experience race differently, though this interaction does not take place until Sonia is in college.

Children did not always share explicitly negative experiences of being policed or facing microaggressions to discuss multiraciality. Ana (21), who has a Peruvian mother and White father, described navigating monoracial systems together with her parents. Ana and her younger

sister Gabriela (18) both volunteered for the study, with Gabriela describing her parents' racial socialization efforts as non-existent. She adds "I don't really remember them ever talking about being multiracial. Honestly, actually, we don't even really acknowledge it." Gabriela's account is confirmed by Ana, who shared, "I think the first time we talked about [race or being multiracial] was when we were applying for college. And we had to check those boxes and make sure that they were correctly checked. And my parents… I remember sitting in their room and they were like, 'Well, if your father is White, shouldn't that take precedent over your mother's ethnicity?' And so then we were googling this stuff, and then we're like, 'Oh, well, you can put down both.' So I really think that was the first time we sort of discussed it." Ana's college applications spark a conversation about racial identification and the "correct" way to mark her race. While her parents navigate and discuss this decision together, Ana's account suggests that this may be the first time her parents were forced to contend with how their children's experiences with race and ethnicity may be concretely different from their own. They turn to a search engine, Google, for answers, underscoring the degree to which racial socialization was absent in the home. In this scenario, Ana turns to her parents for guidance, and not knowing the answer, they navigate this together. However, this is not the first nor last time Ana grapples with what it means to be multiracial and how to express her identity. She does find support, though it does not come from her parents, as will be discussed in the next section.

Reasons for Lack of Multiracial Socialization

While passive cases of multiracial socialization take place, the narratives of most multiracial emerging adults in the study instead speak to why multiracial socialization of their parents did not or rarely occur. Individuals described 1) receiving identity validation from other sources beyond their parents or guardians, 2) experiencing multiraciality as superseded by

monoracial identities and experiences, and 3) lacking the language and/or knowledge of how to engage in multiracial socialization.

Validation from other sources. One reason for a lack of multiracial socialization is that children received validation for their multiracial identities from other sources, such as peers or siblings. Returning to the case of Ana and Gabriela, neither their White father nor Peruvian mother express interest in discussing race or multiraciality. However, these sisters, who are three years apart, both describe receiving support from each other. Gabriela shared, "We've been through the same things together. So that always helped me. And we've talked about how we feel identity-wise a lot, just to make sure that like both of us are still connected to our culture and like, don't kind of overthink it too much." While Gabriela and Ana learn family history and gain Spanish fluency from their mother and Peruvian extended family visits, only they know what it is like to navigate multiple racial/ethnic identities and feel concerns about staying "connected to [their] culture." Gabriela's note about overthinking suggests some degree of past mental struggle with respect to identity, but talking to her sister, someone who understands her exact racial position, can keep these struggles in check.

Multiracial children similarly experience validation from their peers, who may be co-ethnics to one of their racial ancestries or multiracial themselves. Shelby (18, White/Black) described feeling "white-washed" in high school and joking that she should just "lean into it" and consider herself White: "I used to literally be like, 'Oh, I act so White. I should just be White passing or something, like I should just commit to it.'" But it is her Black peers in high school who refute her worries, even if they are presented as jokes, and validate her Blackness. She recounts her friends expressing, "You are Black. You should just accept who you are. You don't necessarily need to fit into the standards of [Blackness]." In cases like these, peer validation may

even be more important than parental support, as validation from peer groups becomes increasingly important to identity development in adolescence (Corsaro 1985; Erikson 1993).

Camila (21)'s account shows a clear difference in the identity support she receives from her biracial Mexican/White father and her peers, many of whom are multiracial and light-skinned. Camila describes her father as "very dark skinned for being half Mexican" and "a big, kind of scary-looking guy" due to his size. Perhaps based on his own experiences with racialization, he encourages Camila to identify as Mexican and mark Hispanic/Latino in her records. However, Camila, who is proud of her Mexican ancestry but describes herself as White, is conflicted about doing so. Throughout the interview, she recounted several moments when she was interpreted as White by others and experienced White privilege as a result. Camila is also a social science major in college, through which she studies topics like colonialism, which she connects to her own family's history. "On both sides of my family," she says, "the Whiteness primarily came from somebody either taking advantage of the situation or inserting themselves where they don't belong. And that has been something that has always been really hard for me." Speaking specifically about the Spanish Inquisition, which laid the foundation for White Christian nationalism and biological conceptualizations of race (Davis 1988), she shares somberly, "They achieved it. They did what they wanted to, and it's me, and there's like a lot of shame that comes with that." Understandably, Camila feels conflicted about marking "Mexican" on surveys. Since she believes this has the potential to take away opportunities from others who are racialized as Mexican in their day-to-day lives, Camila believes it would be morally dubious for her to claim this identity on forms such as college admissions or job applications.

Camila grapples with the tension between experiencing White privilege as a personal benefit that comes at the expense of others racialized as non-White. However, she finds some

comfort in being able to discuss these tensions with peers. “A lot of my friends who, they consider themselves or identify themselves as White presenting, oh we have this conversation quite often,” she says. “And they're in the same boat kind of, where it's like, it's ‘*nice*.’” Here Camila emphasizes the word nice and makes exaggerated air quotes to ensure her sarcasm is clear. “It's *beneficial* to be White… But it's also just terrible at the same time, especially when you know where the Whiteness came from.” Individuals like Camila at times draw explicit tensions between historical racism and their own family histories, grappling with what it means to be a physical representation of these inequalities. Some multiracial young adults, like Malika, can discuss these dynamics openly with their families, processing them together. Others, like Camila, Ana, and Gabriela, rely on peers or siblings to think through these difficult dynamics. Thus, children or adult children may not engage in the multiracial socialization of their parents because they seek and/or find identity validation elsewhere.

Superseded by monoracial experiences. In some cases, monoracial experiences, including racism, supersede the challenges of being multiracial. This pattern differs by racial ancestry and is particularly true for those with Black ancestry. Nina (18, White/Black) for example, has been socialized as Black, views herself as Black, and is treated as Black by others. The socialization she engages in for her White mother is focused on teaching her about Blackness. Isaac (20, White/Black) also experiences life primarily as a Black man, with only occasional confusion or questioning from others about his appearance, such as questions about whether he might be Latino. He doesn’t see himself as experiencing any particularly pressing challenges due to his *multiracial* identity, but rather, challenges that emerge from anti-Black racism.

Lack of language or scripts. Finally, multiracial children or young adults may often lack the language needed to teach their parents about multiraciality. Farah (20, Mexican/Pakistani) demonstrates how difficult it was for her to navigate race without clear socialization. She explicitly describes dissatisfaction with her household structure and the lack of racial socialization. When asked an open-ended question about what it was like to grow up in a multiracial household, she says, "I actually didn't like it. Just because it was really confusing. Nobody really sat me down and explained it to me. …I had to come up with my own conclusions or my own opinions, which I guess it could be a good thing." While Farah backtracks to reflect on how establishing her own conclusions about race and identity could be beneficial, she clearly struggled to navigate race as a child, particularly in the face of racism within her own family. She shared, "my dad's side of the family… They didn't really like that we were Mexican. So they would say comments about it or like, treat my mom differently or things like that. Like they didn't really like it. So I kind of thought that I wasn't supposed to like it." Instead of being taught to prepare for bias and prejudicial attitudes, Farah witnessed and experienced them in her own family from an early age, and describes herself internalizing this prejudice as normal and expected. Farah's account suggests that her family also expected her to internalize these attitudes. She states that her Pakistani family "expected us to lean towards one side. That's also why we didn't really see my mom's family as much, just 'cause they didn't really like it either." She goes on to express a sentiment common for multiracial young people, though perhaps more explicit in her case, that she felt "I had to pick a side, but then as I grew up, I kind of had the choice to involve myself with whatever side I wanted or both sides." Farah indicates a lack of racial socialization in her family and no means for her, as a child, to access the language needed to discuss her multiraciality, particularly in the context of tense family relationships. She and her

younger sister Sadia, who also participated in the study, do talk about their identities together, but unlike the case of Gabriela and Ana above, merely validating their identities with each other did not mitigate the distress and confusion experienced by blatant prejudice, exclusion, and identity policing from their family.

In theory, multiracial socialization is an area in which monoracial parents have the most to learn from their children. However, while many parents may have a general awareness that racial socialization and racial identity are important topics to cover with their children, the same is not necessarily the case for multiraciality. Parents may be disinterested in discussing race in general and/or fail to understand how their children's multiracial experiences differ from their own monoracial experiences. Children may not know how to discuss their multiracial identities with their parents, and may find peer or sibling validation to be more easily accessible. For these reasons, multiracial socialization of parents may have been needed, but was not reported to the same degree as general socialization on race, racism, and/or specific ethnic-racial identities.

When Children Engage in Ethnic-Racial Socialization

When do children attempt to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents and when do they choose not to engage? Multiracial individuals, particularly as children, navigate multiple dynamics when attempting to socialize their parents, who hold authority and present an unequal power dynamic. Thus, children who engage in socialization use strategies to increase the odds that their messages will be heard and well-received. Returning to the example of Shelby, who reminds her White mother not to say or sing the n-word, additional family context helps explain when Shelby decides to take on this labor. She describes how her sisters have different skin tones, and as a result appear to be treated differently, even by their own mother. She shares, "My older sister… is the darkest toned one in our family. She felt like my mom was kind of

prejudiced towards her, and kind of stereotyping her." Shelby goes on to give an example: "Sometimes my mom would be like, 'Oh, your sister, she might get mad sometimes because of the Black side in her.' And I'd be like 'That's very stereotypical and racist. But you know you're my mom, and I still love you.'" Here Shelby intervenes when her mother's comment imposes stereotypes on her sister. Additionally, Shelby follows up her comment with reassurance, performing emotional labor and placating an authority figure when she empathizes with how her mother might feel being called out, ending her comment with "I still love you." Shelby's approach to socializing her mother demonstrates an awareness of the power dynamics between parent and child, as children act not as completely free agents, but exercise agency within age constraints (James et al. 1998; Kwon 2024).

As suggested above, multiracial individuals may be motivated to engage in socialization by a desire to protect and/or teach their siblings. Madison (19), who has a Vietnamese mother and White father, describes how she came to start engaging in socialization more frequently. Referring to her immediate family, she notes, "I feel like we started talking more about race as I got older, because I got really involved in activism and more into politics. [The Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate movements] made me more aware of how I want to bring up those topics more, especially since my brother's in high school. He's 16. So it's just like, bringing up those topics and him just like understanding it more." Here Madison describes general conversations about race, where she views simply "bringing up those topics" as beneficial to helping her brother learn. Her motivation to do so also stems from a perceived lack of these conversations, and perhaps socialization, when she was younger: "I feel like we [my family] started talking about [race] maybe a little bit later than we should have? So I kind of wish we did talk about more of those things." As a result, Madison intentionally initiates conversations about

race, providing opportunities for her family, particularly her younger brother, to engage. Unlike Shelby, Madison is not correcting an explicitly racist belief or behavior. Instead, she attempts to engage in proactive racial socialization and create an environment in which her family can become more comfortable and willing to discuss potentially difficult topics like race, so that her younger brother can benefit and learn from these conversations.

Another factor that shaped multiracial adult children's decisions to engage in ethnic-racial socialization was perceptions of parent receptiveness. Above, Madison talks about initiating conversations about race in her family to help her younger brother learn about these topics earlier than she did. However, she also describes instances of engaging in direct, intentional socialization with her White father. Providing context, she describes her father as the following:

> My dad, I feel like sometimes, I don't know. Like I love him, but sometimes he doesn't understand race as deeply I feel like because he is White. He doesn't really understand his White privilege. I try to tell him to put himself like in their shoes, because you can't really understand something unless you go through that.

When Madison initiated conversations about race, particularly with respect to current events, she says, "It would sometimes get intense in the household over issues like [BLM], but he did end up coming to a Black Lives Matter protest, just like to support me and make sure I was safe. So that was honestly, like that was important to me because it shows he's willing to be open-minded." Although discussions about race with her White father could be "intense," presumably due to disagreement, Madison is encouraged when her father willingly attends a BLM protest with her. Even if she believes that his primary motivation may have been to ensure her safety, his decision has symbolic value to her, representing an open-mindedness to learning about race and racism, and suggesting that their "intense" household conversations were not held in vain.

However, the resistance Madison experienced from her father appears relatively benign compared to the parents of other participants, who could be far less receptive to the ethnic-racial socialization efforts of their children. Ava (18) has a White mother and Cuban father. She described her father as identifying as White, despite a strong sense of Cuban identity, which puzzles Ava but is consistent with the U.S. government's efforts to normalize Cuban refugees in 1960s and 70s as White and middle class, in service of a broader ideological commitment to anti-communism (Current 2008, 2010). Providing additional context, Ava described her dad as such: "My dad is definitely very Republican and I think a little racist and homophobic. So when Black Lives Matter and things like that happened, we definitely talked about race more. But I feel like we only did that to like butt heads …me and my brother are more democratic leaning. So we make him explain his reasoning a lot." In her account, Ava notes a political difference between the views of her father compared to her and her brother, and found that these differences were exacerbated by the 2020 wave of Black Lives Matter. As she described above, she came to understand her father's views as racist, which she and her brother were invested in challenging. The rest of Ava's account suggests that children may face risks when attempting to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents. Continuing to describe the conversations above, she says:

> I used to be very scared to participate in them just because my dad gets very aggressive and hostile very quickly. So I was not comfortable doing it until I was more like, uh, secure in my beliefs, I think. But yeah, before they would usually go poorly. But recently we've talked about it and now that I kind of have some support from my brother, I wouldn't say we end up on the same page necessarily, but I feel like we explain our reasoning better, more thoroughly.

Ava's description of her father as "aggressive and hostile" could easily become reason for her to decide that attempting this racial socialization is not worthwhile. Her account suggests that upon

discovering that her father might react aggressively to these conversations, she took a step back, noting she was "not comfortable." But Ava did not choose to disengage completely. Instead, she became more "secure in her beliefs" as she grew older, and worked to defend her beliefs, presumably learning the right language and gathering evidence to support her arguments. While political orientation plays a role, Ava never describes her goal as convincing her father to become liberal. Rather, she is focused on racist and homophobic views. Two factors in Ava's account provide reasons why she has decided to continue engaging in these conversations with her father. First, she directly notes that she has "support" from her brother, referring primarily to the fact that the three of them discuss these topics together, and that her brother can provide additional counterpoints and evidence in their discussions. Second, Ava witnesses progress in these conversations. This progress does not take place to the same degree as it did for Madison, whose White father attended a Black Lives Matter protest with her. Ava's account suggests that this would be an entirely unrealistic goal to expect of her White Cuban father, at least at the time of her interview. Rather, her family's version of progress is that their disagreements appear to be more productive and are not overshadowed by aggression and hostility. Ava's goal is to help her father recognize the racism and homophobia in his views, but on the way to this goal, she has solidified her own political beliefs and practiced expressing them in a convincing way. Her account leaves the impression that while the road ahead may be long, Ava and her brother appear optimistic about the possibility of reaching a better understanding of race and racism with their father.

When Children Do Not Engage in Ethnic-Racial Socialization

Despite the potential for optimism in the examples above, there are also clear cases in which multiracial emerging adults do not engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents. First, some families *do* fall into the positive, race-conscious image of multiracial

families that looms large and vivid in the American imagination. In some cases, children do not feel the need to engage in active or direct ethnic-racial socialization of their parents because this labor appears unnecessary. These young adults express that their parents already demonstrate a good understanding of race and racism and can recall examples of effective and helpful ethnic-racial socialization during their upbringing. This can be the case for both White and non-White parents. Margaret (21), who has a Cambodian mother and White father, is one such example. She could readily describe multiple forms of ethnic and racial socialization taking place in her home, including socialization specific to her ethnicity, such as fond memories of her parents singing karaoke to Cambodian music, Cambodian artwork in her home, and participation in cultural festivals when her family lived in a large city. Margaret and her two brothers also experienced general racial socialization from parents described as "passionate" about keeping their children informed. She shared, "There's one experience that stands out. It was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and my dad bought me a pack of Crayola markers that were like skin tones. Something like a 'multicultural' set. And I was like, 'this is great!' [imitating excited child's voice] I liked to draw as a kid, so I was like, 'This is great!' And then he had a little conversation with me about what it meant, and it was like, 'Yes! This is great!'" Margaret's account includes what is considered "positive" racial socialization, such as cultural education and instilling pride in a child's identities, which are processes important for healthy identity development. She also goes on to describe bias preparation, another crucial form of ethnic-racial socialization, in the context of conversations about race in the aftermath of police violence against Black individuals. Unlike many others in her age cohort, Margaret's first memory of these conversations is not in 2020 but 2014, after the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. Margaret described her father's reaction as such:

> My dad pulled us together, recognizing that my kids are Brown in this country and that can be dangerous. And so, he told us, if you get pulled over, if you interact with the cops, just make sure you're being completely respectful, you know, keeping your hands on the wheel… just like staying safe. He was really afraid that something was going to happen to us. Or that something could happen to us just because we're not White.

While Margaret describes herself as potentially being able to pass as White, depending on the circumstances, she notes that her oldest brother has far darker skin. Not long after this conversation with her father, her brother was pulled over by a police officer for speeding. While he left the encounter safely, the paperwork from this police encounter showed that the cop had listed Margaret's brother as Black, affirming their father's fears that his children could be racially profiled and at risk of violence. This experience was one that Margaret and her family processed together, consistent with her parents' approach to ethnic-racial socialization in the home thus far. Margaret concluded by describing her experience as such: "Our home was always one where we could talk about political issues, which was a really important part of my upbringing." Margaret and her family navigate both positive and celebratory aspects of their family's racial and ethnic backgrounds together, as well as the negative consequences that come from being racialized as non-White, consistently or not, in the U.S.

Most participants' families, though, were not like Margaret's. Multiracial young adults more commonly reported that their families took a more passive and reactive approach to ethnic-racial socialization, exemplified by Sonia's account. Sonia (20), who was briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, has an Indonesian mother and White father. She describes infrequent conversations about race within her family that appear to have been relatively inconsequential for her identity development. She says, "We've had conversations like, 'Oh, I wonder, what do you think I look like more?' Or 'what do you think people see me as?' I've asked my siblings and my family members that before." Sonia also recalls discussing Kamala Harris's background with

her family, noting “we kind of related to that too.” After describing these conversations, she shared, “I can't really pinpoint any other specific conversations” until prompted with a follow-up question about conversations with her White father.

Overall, Sonia’s experiences with ethnic-racial socialization among her family appear relatively minimal, being neither strongly negative nor positive, including with her White father. She begins by describing him as someone who “definitely tries to be really sensitive about [race]” and adds “I don't know. I mean, there's never been any feeling, or situations where I felt like, ashamed of my race with him or anything like that.” One prominent memory she has of discussing race with her father occurred once she was already in college. Sonia shares:

> I was on a Zoom call, attending a talk and it was about minorities in STEM… I asked a question like, how should mixed people approach the situation? I don't remember what my exact question was. But someone took issue with me using the word ‘mixed’ instead of ‘multiracial.’ And I felt like really bad. I didn't even know that we can't say that. But then I explained the situation to [my dad] and he was really defensive of me. He's like, ‘You deserve to identify however you want!’ …he seemed very supportive of me identifying how I want to and, yeah, we've never really had any issues.

The situation Sonia describes is one of support and identity validation from her father, though it is a reactive response, rather than proactive socialization. While Sonia appears appreciative of her father’s reaction, this encounter occurs when she is already an adult, and she does not recall any comparable conversations taking place during her childhood or adolescence. This account instead demonstrates that her father is “supportive” and “defensive” of her, perhaps doing the work of showing that her father is not racist, presenting him in a progressive light, and establishing his moral identity. Sonia herself may be defensive of her father in return; she frequently speaks as if there is a clear possibility that he could be racist, that this is a baseline assumption about White parents that is reasonable, and that she must refute it. Sonia’s father

does not appear to engage deeply in any form of ethnic-racial socialization, nor has he expressed hurtful and/or racist views toward Sonia or any other racial group. As a result, Sonia is not compelled to attempt any racial socialization of her father.

Risk and parental hostility. Yet, other multiracial emerging adults decide not to attempt or continue ethnic-racial socialization due to the perceived risks and parental hostility. Kevin (18) has a Filipina mother and White father. He describes his father as "politically really conservative, almost alt-right" and his mother as "kind of more conservative too, but not as conservative [as his father]." When asked if his parents had ever talked to him and his sister about race, Kevin described a home environment that wasn't conducive to these conversations. Referring to his mother, he notes, "I think she's someone who doesn't think race is much of a factor, so she doesn't really want to talk about it." By contrast, Kevin tries to avoid conversations about race with his father, stating that due to his father's "almost alt-right" views, "whatever he had to say about race is something I wouldn't really want to hear. …we just try to steer him away from politics whenever possible." He adds, "No one would want to listen just because it's like hateful kind of stuff." Kevin and his sister appear to follow the lead of their mother, who prefers not to discuss race. Since race and politics are so intertwined in this scenario, Kevin finds that avoiding the conversation altogether is the most productive way to deal with his father's views.

Similarly, Avery (18), who has a Chinese/Mexican mother, Chinese/Korean stepmom, and White father, finds conversations with their conservative White father to be unproductive. They share, "My dad was very opposed to any conversation about race or any acknowledgement beyond jokes that he could make or beyond moves that he could make, to choose a certain neighborhood to live in, for instance, or media to consume." Avery notes here that their father isn't necessarily opposed to talking about race and that he appears to enjoy making jokes that his

family finds uncomfortable. Like Kevin's mother, Avery's notes "my stepmom didn't really talk to me about race 'cause I guess she didn't want to step on my dad's territory or something like that." Both Avery and their mother defer to their father's preferences, and with good reason. Elaborating on the family dynamic, Avery says, "He would start a lot of conversations and about Black Lives Matter and as much as I wanted to respond, I recognize that saying anything [never] changed anything, other than it would have resulted in a very awkward car ride and just lots of anger." Race does come up in Avery's family and when it does, Avery's father wants to be the one who steers the conversation. When the conversations are no longer one-sided, their father reacts with anger. Even Avery's stepmother recognizes and contributes to this dynamic, as Avery notes an exception to their stepmom avoiding race: "when she was angry, she would bring it up." Avery goes on to note that their stepmom sometimes pulled Avery into these conversations to win an argument against their father and described this dynamic as "more so as a way to snap at my dad than anything to talk about." Thus, for Avery, in an environment where conversations about race were most often, if not always fraught and hostile, avoiding engagement is the safest choice. Even still, Avery expresses that they wish they could respond, but that past attempts have resulted in failure.

Non-White parent socialization. While most examples shared here involved White parents, particularly White conservative fathers, children's bidirectional ethnic-racial socialization does not exclusively occur for this group. Sam (21) has a White mother and Chinese father, and describes attempts at socializing his father. He says, "My mom was pro-Black Lives Matter. She didn't do marches or anything but you know, she's liberal. She believes in equal rights and all that. And I mean, those are the values I generally took on as well." He goes on to describe his Chinese father: "My dad, he's not super socially conservative, but he was

always very skeptical of Black Lives Matter. …My mom definitely told me he had attitudes that were pretty anti-Black." Both Sam and his mother perceive flaws in how his father, who is a first-generation immigrant, understands race and racism in the U.S. His father's anti-Black attitudes only came up in the context of learning about them from his mother, after the two of them had divorced. However, this lack of understanding around anti-Black racism leads Sam to attempt racial socialization in the form of bias preparation at a later date, at the height of anti-Asian violence related to COVID-19. Sam notes: "There was a time when he [my dad] was driving out to Indiana to visit us. And I made sure to tell him, I was like, 'You know, I'm sure I don't have to tell you, but you're going to want to be careful about where you stop for gas.' And he said, 'oh, I know, I know.'" Sam engages in bias preparation by warning his father to be careful and going on to name a specific town to avoid, which is colloquially understood as having connections to White supremacy and being a modern-day sundown town. Yet Sam also acknowledges his father's authority, softening his recommendation with "I'm sure I don't have to tell you," a strategy employed by children when they are attempting to socialize "up" to a figure who holds more power and authority. Sam perceived his father as holding an inadequate view of racism in the U.S., due to his skepticism around Black Lives Matter, so this may be what compels him to make sure his father understands the possibility that he may face anti-Asian racism in Indiana.

Why Children Engage in Ethnic-Racial Socialization

Why do multiracial individuals, either as children or in young adulthood, attempt to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents? On a broad level, multiracial individuals engage in socialization 1) for themselves, 2) for the family unit, and 3) for social change. On an individual level, multiracial young adults want their loved ones to understand

their experiences, striving to close the gap between their monoracial parents' understandings of racial identity and their own experiences. On a familial level, multiracial young adults choose to socialize their parents into norms around race and racism out of a sense of preservation for the family unit. They correct parents' racist remarks to help parents avoid embarrassing interactions with others and avoid being viewed as racist, a label that involves stigma and to some degree, reflects poorly on the entire family unit. Pointing out and/or correcting racist views is a matter of "saving face" for the family. In their interviews, participants were frequently candid about the racism that took place in their own families, but even in this interview context, they engaged in face-saving measures, for example in providing disclaimers about the goodness of a parent's character, describing a parent's progress in understanding race and racism, noting their continued efforts to socialize their parents about race, and depicting a parent's understanding as a work-in-progress.

Finally, on a societal level, some participants explicitly described wanting to help their parents better understand race for the sake of social change and activism. Typically, these young adults were politically involved and either interested in or doing social justice work through participation in school clubs and volunteer work. During the 2020 wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, a common sentiment shared among White progressives was a call to "talk to your racist family members," suggesting that racist views could be best remedied by trusted loved ones. Madison (19, Vietnamese/White) shared that she was directly impacted by these sentiments, stating "definitely since the past four years, going throughout high school, and just experiencing and seeing all [these] different movements, the Black Lives Matter and Asian hate… made me more aware of how I kind of want to bring up those topics more." However, even participants who were not explicitly interested in social justice seemed to understand

correcting racist views as a sort of duty or personal responsibility. Racism is a moral issue that, despite public perceptions, spans political orientation and crosses partisan lines, particularly for conservative multiracial families. While the examples most common in this study were those of progressive multiracial adult children striving to change conservative parents' views, conservative participants did not unconditionally accept racism within their own families either.

Ethnic-racial socialization in politically conservative families. Politically, Georgia (20, Filipina/White) described herself as "pretty conservative" like the rest of her family. She recounted a conversation in which her White grandmother expresses racialized nativism:

> We were walking in a park. At the park, some of the pavilions and stuff were taped off. But then some picnic tables were open and so there is- they look like a Middle Eastern family. They're having a picnic and the tape was kind of torn down on one of the pavilions. And so they're just eating in the pavilion. My grandma says, she's like, 'Don't they see the sign? I guess they feel like they can do whatever they want if they're not even citizens.' So in my head, I was like, you don't even like, wear a mask or anything, like you don't follow the rules either.

Georgia doesn't confront her grandmother in this instance, and her resistance is only in her own head. But by this point, which was during her first year of college, Georgia seemed to have accepted that her grandmother's views wouldn't change. She noted that in past conversations, Georgia and her Filipina mother would push back in gentle ways, such as "Oh, grandma. That's not right." However, her grandmother was resistant, refuting any potential accusations of racism by referring to past behaviors. Georgia reported that her grandmother "does like to say…she went to the sit-ins for civil rights, for the civil rights movement. So, I think she thinks that excuses her from being racist. She's like, 'I'm not racist. I went to a sit-in when I was your age.'" To some degree, Georgia excuses these moments to justify not continuing to push back. With resignation, Georgia says, "She'll say stuff like that. But she's my grandma. I love her. She's like in her 60s, I think. Or I think she's close to 70. So, like old people, you know?" Nor does her

grandmother express views that impact Georgia and her racial group directly. Instead, Georgia says, “She's very nice to my family. She, like, loves my mom. Me and my mom.” When asked about her White father, Georgia shared, “I don't see my dad as being White, like he's just my dad. So yeah, I don't really ever think about that in the home.”[1] She also added “I don't even see my mom as being Asian, like she’s just my mom,” despite previously describing her home as a “Filipino house” and noting cultural differences. But these sentiments suggest that Georgia did not deal with clear racialization from her parents or hear them express blatantly racist views, thus, she felt no need to engage in ethnic-racial socialization.

Participants in this study were more likely to lean liberal than conservative, so one limitation of this study is an inability to describe a range of experiences from conservative multiracial young adults. However, we can look at Chloe’s case as another example of why conservative children may not engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents or other family members. Chloe (19) has a White mother and Korean father. Her maternal grandfather is Italian and as a result, their family retains Italian cultural practices and traditions, particularly through foods and holidays. Chloe also speaks to “language mashing” at home, in which as a child she learned both English and Korean vocabulary and would occasionally mix up languages. Chloe describes having conversations about politics with her family, giving “we need more guns” as one example of a topic they might discuss. While Georgia pushes back when her grandmother makes blatantly racist comments, Chloe doesn’t report any explicitly racist sentiments from her immediate or extended family. Alternatives to this account are possible. For

[1] While this sounds like color-evasive rhetoric and a conflation of Whiteness with racelessness or normalcy, this sentiment is echoed by other participants who drew a contrast between their multiracial homes, where they felt they could “be themselves” without dwelling on race, vs. contexts outside the home, where they dealt with frequent racialization.

example, Chloe may have heard racist remarks but not chosen not to share them during her interview, or she may have heard remarks that she didn't perceive as racist. Regardless, the result is that Chloe does not report engaging in any ethnic-racial socialization of her parents or extended family. She offers only one brief example of race coming up explicitly in a conversation with her White maternal grandparents: "I think the closest would be with the college admissions. My grandparents would be like, 'Oh, it's so unfair that they would, like, discriminate against you in higher education,' I guess. Which is a complicated issue. I'm not even really sure myself if it's right or wrong, but it is what it is, so it doesn't change me having an opinion." While seemingly benign and uninfluential, this interaction offers a lot to unpack with respect to socialization dynamics in Chloe's family.

This brief interaction between Chloe and her grandparents reveals a few factors that shape why she does not have to engage in racial socialization. First, although her grandparents are ascribing to an inaccurate understanding of affirmative action in college admissions, they do so to express sympathy for their granddaughter. Thus, there is nothing Chloe perceives as racist about the interaction that merits addressing. Second, although Chloe would not describe this interaction as racist, she expresses doubt about the accuracy of these views. However, since she admits to not being informed enough to know whether this is accurate, she is not equipped with the knowledge necessary to engage in ethnic-racial socialization. Recall that liberal leaning participants like Ava (White/Cuban) also felt they needed to educate themselves before engaging in these conversations with their parents. However, in the absence of clearly identifiable racism, Chloe is not particularly motivated to educate herself on racism and affirmative action; her situation lacks the urgency felt by those like Ava. Third, Chloe's account suggests that she is not politically engaged nor interested in becoming engaged at this point in her life. "It is what it is,

so it doesn't change me having an opinion," which is the last point she makes in the quote above, suggests resignation and disinterest. This remark might be understood as Chloe believing her opinion won't lead to any changes, either to her grandparents' views or the larger political structure, or that she holds her opinion regardless of what is actually true about affirmative action. Ultimately, Chloe doesn't see any reason to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of her parents or extended family and is likely not equipped to do so. Thus, the absence of clearly identifiable racism, a lack of understanding or awareness around race, and a lack of political engagement regardless of partisanship, are all factors that dissuade multiracial young adults from attempting ethnic-racial socialization.

Conclusion

In sum, multiracial children may engage in ethnic-racial socialization to inform their parents about race and racism in general, norms and experiences of a specific ethnic/racial ancestry, and to a lesser degree, multiracial-specific experiences. However, the conditions under which multiracial individuals attempt to engage in socialization or not vary. Socialization becomes explicitly bidirectional, that is, children take part in socializing their parents, under the following conditions: 1) parents' ethnic-racial socialization is limited or understood as inadequate, including racist views, and 2) parents appear receptive or show a willingness to listen to their children and/or change. Ultimately, these accounts reveal how children exercise agency in filling the gaps in their parents' knowledge about race. In particular, multiracial children's experiences and identities are likely to differ from their monoracial parents, creating a gap that parents may not be able to adequately fill. However, although children may be experts in multiraciality relative to their monoracial parents, they too lack scripts to discuss or make sense of their multiraciality. Thus, examples of children teaching their parents about their multiracial

identities and experiences were limited, compared to socialization on a specific racial ancestry or racism in general.

This research offers the following implications. First, it speaks to the diversity of multiracial families and ethnic-racial socialization practices *among* members, as compared to research that has focused on how multiracial families navigate racism from others *as a unit* (Dalmage 2000; Johnson 2024b). Second, participants' accounts reveal the hidden labor of multiracial families, children in particular, who must live within a monoracial system. Challenging often unspoken assumptions that interracial couples have overcome racism through their unions, this research examines cases in which parents hold blatant and/or subconscious racist views that are challenged by their multiracial children. Interracial unions may be a measure of decreased social distance between racial groups; however, racism can be and often is present in these unions. Racism that is excused, ignored, or unseen by a spouse may be confronted by children, who exercise agency in teaching their parents about race and racism, and in doing so, contribute to generational social change. Third, this research underscores the importance of historically and scientifically grounded education of race and racism, suggesting that the recent surge of knowledge suppression in the U.S., including widespread book banning and panics over critical race theory (CRT) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), are particularly effective surgical strikes against the establishment of a better-informed public who is equipped, rather than afraid, to have difficult and open conversations about race and racism. In this political climate, it may be children who are the best equipped to challenge their parents' inaccurate views on race and racism; however, the elimination of access to education on race and racism is an attempt to neuter these efforts.

Multiracial emerging adults learn about race, Whiteness, and multiraciality through family socialization. However, as discussed in this chapter, parental ethnic-racial socialization can be insufficient for the circumstances that children encounter, prompting children to engage in the ethnic-racial socialization of their parents. Family is only one source of socialization and racialization. In the next chapter, I turn to schools as another source of racial-ethnic socialization, in particular, examining the implicit messages about race communicated in schools, racialization experiences within schools, and the influence of school peers.

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Chapter 3:

Contradictions and Negative Role Models:

Ethnic-Racial Socialization and Racialization in Schools

In her book *Original Sin*, Eve Ewing (2025) argues that schooling has different functions for students of different racial groups. For White students, schooling was intended to create a unified White citizenry, particularly between European immigrant groups. For Black students, Ewing documents evidence that schools aimed to create an obedient, "civilized" labor force. Finally, for Native students, the explicit genocidal goal to "kill the Indian to save the man" informed schooling practices that sought to erase Native identities and encourage assimilation into a White mainstream. Ewing focuses on Black and Native students, but her arguments underscore widespread academic arguments on the role of schools in perpetuating racial inequality (Lewis 2003; Morris, Conteh, and Harris-Perry 2018; Ochoa 2013; Warikoo 2016) and a broader public recognition of racial inequalities as "by design" or a "feature not a bug" of American society (Fleming 2019; McGhee 2021; Oluo 2018; Ray 2022). Examining the differential function of schools for different groups of students provides an interesting framework for examining how schooling today functions in classrooms that are, at least in theory, more racially diverse than the segregated schools of America's history. In the multiracial classroom, teachers' messages about race must apply to a broad swath of students; color-blindness and race-neutral messages most clearly fit these demands.

Based on the accounts of multiracial students, I argue that 1) schools dismiss the significance, and even presence of, race and racism within U.S. history and society, confirming previous studies on schools' adoption of a "race-neutral" stance (Hagerman 2018; Lewis 2003); 2) multiracial students report experiences of racialization within schools that contradict schools'

dismissal of race and racism; and 3) students navigate race on a micro-level through both the racialization by and support of their school peers.

Below, I examine the racial socialization messages in K-12 educational settings, examining instruction and curricula on race, racialization within schools, and racialization in peer interactions. I find that multiracial young adults most commonly described their formal education on race as lacking and/or unsatisfactory, and received messages that race and racism were not topics worthy of study. At the same time, multiracial individuals reported clear experiences of racialization in schools through teachers, curricula, and peer interactions. Schools operated as a "place to know learn your place" (Ewing 2025), even as schools and peers themselves did not necessarily know how to categorize multiracial individuals. Thus, multiracial individuals drew on various reference points to 1) make sense of their own racial position relative to the racial groups present, 2) draw distinctions between their moral beliefs and classmates' undesirable ones, and/or 3) find support and validation in their racial identities.

Formal Education on Race

Formal education on race and ethnicity in the classroom was often described as lacking by participants. Lydia (18), who has a Korean mother and White father, reflected on how covering topics related to race was a minimal requirement in her Indiana high school curriculum, but was easily skipped. She shared that during "junior year of high school, actually we would have, I think like 30 minutes a week… all the teachers had to go through this presentation and usually it was about topics of like race. So diversity or exclusion or inclusion or like, internal biases, or something like that." Reflecting on motivation, she said, "I guess that was the administration's attempt to have those conversations, but a lot of times the teachers wouldn't actually go through those presentations or like those 30 minutes were actually used for class time

or something like that, so it really didn't really happen." Lydia's teachers appeared to avoid this additional "required" instruction, which seem to be part of efforts to address the school's diversity, equity and inclusion, out of time constraints or to cover materials required in their regular curriculum.

Limited Curriculum

When participants did report receiving instruction on race, they described it as limited, focused only on a few historical events, or mostly on a few Black experiences, like celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr. Beyond her high school's failed attempts at "DEI" conversations, Lydia described her school curriculum on race as "mainly focused on Black history." Like other participants with Asian and Latiné ancestry, she was dissatisfied with the limited attention to other groups: "Very rarely would we talk about Asian American history. Usually, it was only in the context of like the transnational railroad or during World War II, with the incarceration camps. I think those are like the only two historical events that we covered in like all of my history classes that had like some sort of connection with Asian Americans or Asians." Ryan (20) echoed Lydia's sentiments, sharing "We learned about Martin Luther King quite a bit, given like, you know, Black History Month. We didn't learn about too much else besides. Like, I remember we talked about a little bit about like Hispanic Heritage Month too, and like Asian Heritage Month. But other than that, we didn't talk about race that much." Gabriel was one of the few participants who reported talking a lot about race in the classroom, perhaps shaped by the fact that he attended high school in New Jersey, but he still reported dissatisfaction with the scope of race instruction: "It was like the only focus in that class was like the interaction of White and Black racial politics in America."

Multiracial individuals also addressed perceived shortcomings in the nature of their education on race, describing it as overly optimistic, omitting harsh histories, and brief to the point of being inaccurate. Sam (21), who has a White mother and Chinese father, described a lack of Asian American and Native American history, and added that "a lot of Black history is, you know, kind of, you know, cleaned up, you know, to make it seem like certain things weren't as bad or that certain individuals were outliers." Malika (20, Latina/Black) spoke similarly: "I feel like we might, like, touch on slavery, but it's like, very brief and like surface level. And it's kind of like, it's just something that happened and it wasn't that bad." Learning more about slavery, including in college classes, led Malika to realize how "surface-level" her K-12 education on race and slavery had been. Recreating her reaction to the severity, she expressed, "Uh, this was horrible! But like, it definitely isn't covered."

Camila (21), who has a White mother and biracial Mexican/White father, reported a more blatantly dismissive attitude toward education around race at her school. When asked if she remembered any formal education on race throughout K-12, Camila began with "I don't think I ever formally learned anything about it." She recounts an experience "in AP Oral History" in which her teacher "looked inside" the required lesson plans and asked the class, "'We're all on the same page that like slavery is bad, right?' And we said 'yes.' And he said 'ok, moving on.'" In this instance, Camila and her peers were made aware that content related to race, in particular slavery, was required as part of their Advanced Placement course curriculum. Yet their teacher dismisses this content as unnecessary, as long as students agree "slavery is bad." On the surface, this interaction could be interpreted as a lack of instruction on race. That is, Camila's teacher fails to provide instruction related to race, even when it is listed as part of required curriculum. However, this moment also sends a clear message to students: race is unimportant and no longer

relevant as a topic of study. Students are not expected to be knowledgeable or conversant in America's racist histories in school nor, presumably, in their futures. Camila would go on to become an anthropology major particularly interested in studying in race and ethnicity, but it is not unreasonable to expect that other students internalized and/or agreed with their teacher's dismissive approach toward instruction on race-related topics and adopted this attitude toward race and racism themselves.

Considering the function of schooling, Eve Ewing (2025) discusses how schools have historically served as a tool of assimilation for Southern and Eastern European immigrants to the U.S. Schools aimed to eliminate ethnic differences to create a "unified White citizenry." In today's desegregated (though not necessarily integrated) classrooms, teachers must communicate to students who occupy a range of racial positions. Minimizing racial difference and dismissing historical divisions on the basis of race and histories of racism serves as a national project not unlike the historical practices Ewing analyzes in segregated and Indian boarding schools. Malika's (20, Latina/Black) own words sum up the impact of this dismissal of race well: "It's one of those things. It's like Black history or just like any other culture's history is kind of like, it's in the lesson, but somehow we never get to it… It kind of makes you [feel] like, if you're a minority in the classroom, it's like, oh, like you don't have enough time for me." Multiracial students noticed this gap in their education, speaking to either the literal absence of material on non-White groups or the tendency for teachers and schools to gloss over the more brutal aspects of racism present in U.S. history.

"Own Research"

When students did not receive education relevant to their ethno-racial ancestries and identities, which was most of the time, they described doing their "own research." Gabriel

clearly described his thought process in deciding to embark on this self-directed research. After discussing his growing disillusionment with schooling on race and its limited focus to only Black-White relations, he says: “It was kind of midway through high school where I kinda checked out, so to speak. Mentally. I was going through the motions of going to class, and doing the homework and stuff. But it felt like I had stopped learning. And I had to focus my efforts somewhere else. To learn.” Frustrated with a lack of ethnic-racial socialization from both his schools and his parents, Gabriel concluded: “when I learned a lot more is when I started to realize like, hey, I'm never going to learn this in high school. I’m never going to learn this in middle school. I’m not going to learn it from my parents because they don't really talk much about that. So I gotta learn it on my own. You know?” While not all participants expressed such clear dissatisfaction with their school systems, the majority did describe attempts to fill a gap in understandings about their racial and ethnic ancestries through their “own research.”

Participants like Mateo and Gabriel conducted research into family ancestry completely outside of a school setting. Mateo (20, Latino/Indigenous/White) described tracking down and reading about specific ethnic groups in his family history, identifying one South American Indigenous group and one Spanish ethnic group as being the primarily groups in his ethnic ancestry. He came to intentionally identify with those groups over constructs like “Mexican” or “Native American.” Gabriel (21) described his ancestry as “Celtic French, Chicano, and Algerian Jew.” He initially learned about his ancestries through lived experiences with his immediate family and visits to extended family. However, time spent with his immediate and extended families decreased substantially after his parents got divorced. To fill this gap, Gabriel learned about his ancestries and different cultural practices online.

Other participants sought information on contemporary race dynamics rather than family history. Similar to Gabriel, Diane (19), who has a Filipino mother and White, Latvian father, described her own research process as initiated by a realization that her school curriculum on race would remain limited to discussions of Martin Luther King and Native Americans in colonial America. She also noted inadequate racial socialization from her parents. She shared, "if I had a question [for my parents], it would sort of be kind of answered, but not like the full extent." As a result, Diane says, "I really tried to find answers. I remember I would Google like how many Filipino people are in [my city] and things like that. So I think a lot of it, and a lot of my exploration, was from myself and doing my own research through the Internet." Participants also described learning about race online and through social media, especially in the wake of race-related news, such as protests in response to the murder of George Floyd or instances of anti-Asian violence.

One interpretation of this pattern could be that multiracial individuals can do this research on their own and that schools need not concern themselves with this form of education. However, Lydia's case demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining meaningful research without structures or communities of support. Sharing her initial interest in doing her "own research," Lydia (18, Korean/White) says, "My high school offered Chinese classes and I was taking Chinese classes… and [at] some point during that year, I sort of became a lot more self-aware of my own race and then how it differs from, I guess, the majority population of my school." She elaborated: "I start[ed] to, I guess pay more attention to my Korean heritage. And was a lot more curious to learn more about not only just like my Korean heritage, but also just other cultures and other ethnicities and customs and that stuff."

> Interviewer: What did that look like for you, when you became more interested? Are there things that you gravitated toward or types of media you started to consume or anything like that?
>
> Lydia: I started to get interested in studying Korean. I started to get into K-pop and I watched a few K-dramas. But that was mainly it. I mean, occasionally I would read something like, some cultural aspect or something online, but I didn't really have anybody, I guess, in my immediate friend group or my family that was as interested in Korean culture. I didn't really have anybody to, I guess, share my interest with.

Lydia described becoming more keenly aware of her racial difference from others during high school and developing an interest in exploring her Korean ancestry. Yet, like a few other participants, her exploration process stagnates in the absence of communities and/or supportive others to facilitate this exploration. Lydia suggests that she did not continue this exploration until college, where she continued to study Chinese and went on to take an Asian American Studies course, which she referenced frequently during the interview. Many participants were exploring or had explored race and identity further in college, but it was possible for multiracial students to feel affirmed in K-12 schools, even in the absence of adequate curricula on race, as demonstrated in the next section.

Schools and Teachers as Facilitators

Even though race and ethnicity-related curricula were unsatisfactory for most students, schools and teachers could facilitate identity exploration, development, and racial-political consciousness, particularly through open-ended assignments. At times, school assignments provided a structure to do independent research projects on topics of interest to students. In some cases, participants took these assignments as opportunities to learn about their own races, identities, and ancestries. Madison (19), who has a Vietnamese mother and White father, described a high school "research project" requiring students to "fix a societal issue." Madison chose her topic based on wanting to "implement more Asian American female leaders, like in the

business world, because that kind of like directly ties to me." For this project, she described "learning more about the model minority" and stereotypes depicting Asian women as "submissive" and "obedient." Learning about these stereotypes highlighted differences between how others might view her and her mother, and her lived experiences. She says,

> I guess, I never really saw Asian women in that that view. Like I would never describe my mom in that way. She's always been a leader, and just not being really afraid to like, say things I guess. So I kind of [found] that shocking. …I never personally even saw any of the [Asian] women in my life be like that. And it's just like, I guess disheartening to see that, because if they're just seeing us as like following directions…they're not going to see us as someone who can like be a leader… they're not seeing our potential.

While this independent project was illuminating for Madison, thinking about her education overall, she shared "I guess, I honestly haven't had that much education on race, like in the school area." She noted that "in school it was touched upon, but like, kind of beat around the bush. But like, more of my own research and my own reading, like I learned more about it that way. Or I guess from like real world experience. Or from like hearing my mom's stories." Madison learned the most about race through lived experiences with her family and community, but the school assignment she described provided a structure for her to dig into scholarship on how others, specifically out-groups, viewed her racial and gender position.

A combination of school curriculum on race and the opportunity to conduct independent projects could be especially influential for multiracial young adults. Ryan (20), who has a Mexican mother and White father, similarly learned about race with respect to family ancestry primarily on his own. Ryan shared, "I would say like K through 12 education, they could probably do a *little* bit more on race education, but at the same time, I mean, I did quite a bit of research by myself. And I think that's something that like, that schools can promote." Ryan's suggestion appears to be validated by Christine's experience, for whom a combination of

education on race and the opportunity to conduct independent projects was largely influential on her sense of identity. Christine (21), who has a Chinese mother and White father, shared that race was discussed “a lot” during her middle and high school in California, because “you’re kind of required to learn about all subjects.” She went on to say, “It's not necessarily forced upon everyone, but it was brought up to everyone… My school definitely had an emphasis on not just creating diversity, but like, making sure that it was talked about as well. Making sure that like even as children, we understood the weight of it.” Even with what seems to be a robust education on race, Christine’s experience was similar to participants above in that she reported that an independent research project was most influential in her understanding of race and identity. She described a middle school project as providing an avenue for her to delve into her family history, particularly her grandfather’s experiences. Over the course of this school project, she learned about her grandfather’s connections to the Chinese Nationalist Party and what her grandparents would have experienced when they moved to the U.S. Surprising even herself, Christine started to get emotional at this point in the interview, and shared that her grandfather had passed away around the time that she was working on her project. Although Christine expressed surprise at her strong emotions, noting she “wasn’t even close with him,” she went on to describe this assignment having a profound impact on her sense of identity. “I feel like that really brought out kind of like, how fortunate I felt and how much I needed to appreciate the culture… I feel like I owe it to my grandparents.” Expanding upon this, she shared a desire to “continue that culture and make sure that I continually identify with that, and that [it’s] not lost, because of everything that they've gone through.” Christine describes this sentiment as “respecting everything that they've done and just not forgetting that part of me.” She concludes by reflecting on the impact of this assignment and how it encouraged her to engage more deeply with still-living family

members around her: “I think I owe a lot of how I identify to that portion of my life. Because I was just able to be surrounded by people who felt the same way and who identified like that, and people who were interested in learning more about the culture and learning the language. And then I'd call my grandmother and try and speak to her… I learned enough that I can maybe hold a conversation.” For Christine, the presence of family, the passing of her grandfather, and an assignment that allowed her to examine history through the lens of her family’s experiences all dovetailed to foster a strong sense of Chinese identity, motivated by a greater sense of respect, appreciation, and connection to her grandparents.

The opportunity to explore one’s ethnic-racial identities is a crucial aspect of identity development (Cross Jr. 1991; Helms 1993; Phinney 1993; Poston 1990; Root 1990, 1999) but one that is often neglected for non-White students. Yet as participants’ accounts demonstrate, students both desire and seek out opportunities to learn about their ancestries, whether this exploration is facilitated by or takes place in spite of their schooling.

In terms of formal education, or what students learn about race from teachers, classes, and curriculum, I argue the following: first, curriculum on race in K-12 schools is limited. Scholars of multiraciality have noted an absence of teaching specific to multiracial individuals, for example in highlighting the contributions of multiracial historical figures or discussing multiracial experiences in the contemporary U.S. (Peng 2024). However, most participants in my study reported minimal teaching on race and ethnicity overall and no instruction related to multiraciality at all. Instead, race was invisible, actively dismissed, or disconnected from racism in classroom instruction, even as multiracial students were racialized starkly within schools. Second, because instruction on race and race-related topics was insufficient, multiracial students often conducted what they call their “own research.” This process could include searching for

information about one's racial and ethnic ancestry groups online, tracing family background, reading about demographics and culture, learning languages, and consuming media from one or more sides of one's ancestry. Some participants found this research to be necessary and affirming of their identities, while others found it difficult to sustain on top of other commitments and without a system of social support to encourage or structure this exploration. Third, some participants reported a more structured and guided experience of exploration that was facilitated through their schooling. In particular, open-ended assignments and school projects, particularly in middle and high school, enabled students to explore aspects of their identity in a structured way. Through built-in flexibility and open-endedness, which allowed students to engage intellectually in topics of interest to them, schools could facilitate productive identity exploration, even in the absence of adequate curriculum on race and multiraciality.

Racialization in Schools

Although race is often dismissed, touched on only briefly, or not covered in the classroom at all, schools operate a primary site of racialization. Likewise, for students in my sample, schools were often the first place where they became aware of race as children, especially outside of the family unit. I asked participants if they could recall the first time they realized their race or understood what race is in general. Forty-four out of 55 participants recalled a distinctive first memory of race. Locations of this first memory were reported as following: in schools, with either peers or teachers (29 or 65.9%); family (8), which can be broken down into immediate family (5) and extended family (3); news or media (1); church (1); a stranger (1); and a combination of sources (4). Three out of the four who reported combined

sources for their first memory of race included school as one of their sources.[2] So schools are not only a site in which students are racialized, but often where they are racialized for the first time.

While multiracial individuals did not report classroom instruction or curricula as being strongly influential to their understandings of race and identity, they consciously understood peer interactions as having a strong role in developing these understandings. Peers could be more influential than family or provide an important supplement to socialization messages expressed within the family. Researchers have found that as children transition to adolescence, peer opinions begin to overtake those of immediate family in terms of importance and social acceptance (Brown 2004; Erikson 1994). Children and adolescents are likely to come into contact with peers their age the most in school settings, so it is not surprising that this is also where they establish their understandings of race.

Below I will discuss how schools racialize students, in spite of a reported lack of education and curricula on race, through policies and teachers' racialization practices. Then I will discuss the ways in which school peers racialize and socialize each other.

Incorrect Racialization

It was not uncommon for multiracial individuals to be racialized incorrectly or assumed to be of a racial or ethnic ancestry not present in their background. These misinterpretations of a multiracial person's race undoubtedly happen frequently, but interviews can only capture moments when this misinterpretation became known to the participant. Within school settings,

[2] Combined sources were news/media & immediate family (1); neighbor & school (1); immediate family & school (1); and extended family & school (1).

one frequent, noticeable way this happened was in assumptions about students' English language ability.

Several Asian multiracial individuals shared that their schools and teachers categorized them as Hispanic/Latino. Diane, (19), who has a Filipina mother and White father, shared, "a moment that I would say, like, when I really understood, like different races [was] in my elementary school. They had like an English as a first language course or whatever. So if people moved and they didn't know English as well, then they would be put into it." Describing the specific incident, Diane shared, "I remember what they did is they basically just got all of the not White people. And they were like, 'do you know English?' And I was like, 'yeah.' They're like, 'ok.'" The moment Diane describes appears to be very brief. Her teachers most likely thought very little of this interaction. However, Diane easily recalls this moment years later, even describing its immediate impact on her: "It was really awkward. It made me very uncomfortable. And I asked [my parents] why they would ask that because we usually spoke English in my home, so I didn't really understand that… that's just kind of when I started to think about like different races and things like that." Esther (22, Vietnamese/White) had an ESL experience that went even further. She reported:

> I actually was put in ESL when I was in kindergarten. Even though I speak English, I don't speak any- or now I do, but as a kid I didn't speak any other languages. And they didn't even tell my mom. They didn't notify my mom at all.
>
> Interviewer: Wow.
>
> Yeah. I don't know if that was like, race related either, like they didn't think [my mom] could speak English? Or if it's just a bad school. They didn't tell your parents things.

"But yeah," she continued, making light of the situation, "I was in ESL for a couple of days before they realized like, 'Oh this bitch speaks English. Like why is she in here?' [laughing]

Yeah. So." Esther and Diane are both aware that they've been singled out as different from the majority of their peers in some way, as well as physically separated. While Esther doesn't go into details of how she felt at the time, and tended to make light of situations when reporting them in the interview, Diane clearly recalled that the experience felt "awkward" and "uncomfortable."

Kevin (18), who also has a Filipina mother and White father, also reported an early experience with race involving assumptions about language, although this is a story that his parents recounted to him, "something my parents always tell me," rather than his own first memory of race. His parents "said it was in kindergarten or something. [The school] had a little thing where you go and shop for Christmas gifts, for your parents. And then the gift I ended up getting for my mom, it was like some little picture frame thing and it said something in Spanish, because for some reason they thought that I was Hispanic. And then my parents got this like, why? Why?" This is a story that Kevin and his parents now laugh about, and it happened too early in Kevin's life to spark a consciousness of race. However, for others like Diane and Esther, these moments were the first time that they became aware that they were perceived differently from their predominantly White peers, even though the assumptions behind these racializing experiences were incorrect.

Racialization During Lessons on Race

Some participants also reported confusion from school staff and teachers around their race. Most instruction on race that participants reported took place in elementary school with respect to Martin Luther King Jr. and segregation. However, rather than focusing on the content of the lessons, multiracial students often experienced racialization from well-meaning teachers and staff, who hoped to communicate the negative impact of segregation in relatable terms. Morgan (19, Vietnamese/White) shared an example that turned out to be a common experience:

“This is gonna sound so silly, but I think it's like first grade you're talking about segregation or something and the teacher [was] trying to like give examples of why segregation is bad. Being like 'oh, if segregation existed, so-and-so and so-and-so, who are best friends, couldn't be friends. They'd be going to different schools. And I asked her, ‘Would I be White?’ And she's like, ‘I don't know. Not really.’ So I think [that was] the first time I was like, oh, I don't really know what I am.” Alice (18, Filipina/Egyptian) reported a similar experience with her school librarian. She shared:

> The earliest memory that I have is from the second grade. I remember we were reading something, like we were all sitting down, all the kids, and the teacher was sitting in a chair and reading something to us, but somehow we were talking about, like the civil rights movement and segregation. And I- I don't know [if] this is good or bad for the teacher to say, but she basically pointed out that me and a few other kids who were people of color would be segregated from all the other kids in the class, which was interesting, but I- I guess I never considered that my race had that- that my race affected me or what I looked like had affected me until then.

Here, the impact of this racialization is clear. Alice shares this moment as one of her earliest memories of race, and this moment leads her to become aware of her racial differences from her White peers. Lessons on the Civil Rights Movement victories, such as the overturning of school segregation by Brown v. Board of Education, were presumably taught through a lens of U.S. racial progress. Teachers appear eager to contrast the racism of the past to a present that is assumed to be integrated and race-neutral. Ironically, this modern-day comparison leads teachers and school staff to racialize students, at times bringing race into sharp focus for students of color, possibly for the first time. Despite having attended elementary school roughly 10 to 15 years prior to study participants, as the interviewer, I found Alice’s story jarring, given that my own first memory of race was nearly identical. It appears that neither a biracial Black president nor

multiple “racial reckonings” have changed much about how race is taught, and reified, in American schools.

Racialization in Peer Interactions

From childhood through adolescence, peer interactions play a large role in shaping our understandings of the social world, and unsurprisingly, this encompasses understandings of morality, how race is socially constructed in a society, and how racism operates. Multiracial individuals may first develop understandings of race at home, among immediate and extended family. However, interactions with peers of different racial backgrounds, often within schools, highlight dynamics they previously did not have to consider, including their racial position within either a broader range of racial and ethnic groups, or more homogenous context.

School peers shaped multiracial individuals’ experiences of race in a few notable ways. First, peers provided opportunities for individuals to locate and make sense of their racial position as multiracial individuals. Second, peers created opportunities to develop moral and political distinctions, particularly from peers who expressed morally contentious beliefs. Third, peers could also provide identity validation and support, which was particularly influential for multiracial individuals who did not receive this support elsewhere.

Locating Racial Position

One way in which peer interactions influenced multiracial participants was that they communicated messages about racial position. This involved messages about 1) racial appraisals, or learning how others view your race, and 2) racial structures and hierarchies, or experiences of bias, prejudice, and/or discrimination, that reveal widespread beliefs about different racial groups. For example, an individual facing Asian stereotypes for the first time may come to understand that a) she is viewed by others, at least in this context, as Asian; and b) Asians are

seen as falling outside of what is considered “mainstream” or “normal.” In response to the interview question on whether participants could recall a clear first memory of race, 29 (65.9%) named interactions that took place at school. Within this group, peer interactions at school were cited most often, compared to teachers or school circumstances, such as the celebration of a holiday like Columbus Day or a class assignment on family history. Below, I discuss how peers sparked an understanding of multiracial young adults’ racial position through two mechanisms: comparisons of physical appearance and racial stereotypes.

Physical difference from one’s peers is one factor that could spark an awareness of race and racial difference. For example, Claire (18, Latino/White) reported that her hair started to become curly as she reached puberty and that this led to a struggle with her appearance, given that her peers were primarily White girls with straight blonde hair. Her process of becoming aware of her physical difference from peers was heightened by her departure from both the beauty standard and norm in her predominantly White school, where she recalled having only one other Latiné classmate. Lily (18, Asian/White) spoke extensively about differences between her appearance and her White classmates. Despite having a light skin tone, Lily shared, “I don't look too White because of my other dark features, like my hair, my eyebrows, my body hair, all that.” When I asked Lily to elaborate on “dark features,” a phrase she used frequently during the interview, she explained it as the following:

> Like here in the United States, like most White women for example, have blonde hair, brunette hair. Not many have black. And even then, their eyebrows are kinda lighter? [gets close to camera] Like I don’t know if you can tell- [gesturing toward her eyebrows] In here, the light is bad, but in person they’re darker [gesturing at eyebrows]. I have thicker hair. I have um, like lots of arm hair. Um, really thick. It's black. Any body hair, it's black, thick, and it's really different from other kids when I was growing up. They would have like blonde arm hair, so you can't see it, so mine’s- [looks down at hand] like knuckle hair, [lifts up hand, smiling as if sharing an inside joke] you know, knuckle hair

and stuff.

Lily's description is a meticulous breakdown of her physical features and how her appearance differs from her White, especially blonde, peers. Claire reported a similar cataloguing of her appearance, as did Sam (21, Chinese/White), who discussed the size of his calves and the thickness of his leg hair. These processes mirror Curington's (2021) concept of "multiracial dissection," defined as "an intersubjective racialization process that invests bodies with racial and gendered meanings" (269), studied in the context of online dating. Lily experiences multiracial dissection through being "made fun of" and "bullied" by school peers for aspects of her appearance, such as her arm hair. Lily's description of herself during the interview, based on how peers racialized her throughout her K-12 schooling, is also a clear case of internalized "reflected appraisals" with respect to race (Khanna 2004, 2010; Sims 2016).

By contrast, attending a racially and ethnically diverse school could result in fewer opportunities for reflected appraisals, and as a result, less awareness of and concern about racial difference. Olivia (19, White/Mexican) shared, "I was very lucky to have lived in a very diverse neighborhood and it was a good time." She continued, "there wasn't any sort of like discrimination, I guess at least what I could see, because everyone was different. …I don't know how to explain it. It was just very diverse, so I never really like had too much thought into race and stuff like that, when I was a kid." However, even in this racially diverse school and neighborhood context, Olivia reported encountering stereotypes: "I don't know what grade I was in, I was definitely in elementary school, probably like around third or fourth grade. And me and my friends were just talk- we were at lunch, and we were just talking about like our favorite foods or something. And one of my friends asked me, she was like, 'Oh, do you like spicy food?' And I was like, 'Not really.' And she goes, "But you're Mexican, you have to like spicy food."

And I was like, 'What?'" For Olivia, this was an early memory of racial difference and her first conscious encounter with a racial stereotype. However, the racial and ethnic diversity at her school appears to act as a buffer, as she describes this moment as a strange blip in her school experience, rather than a defining moment that made her question her sense of belonging or feel isolated from her peers. She went on to describe making jokes about race with peers as her only other memory of race coming up with classmates in school: "I mean some people would like to joke about, like just make jokes that weren't, you know, aimed to offend anyone but I mean, everyone thought everything was funny. Because everyone was so different, it didn't even matter to us. But we never really like seriously talked about race." For Olivia, interactions that emphasized racial difference were not particularly impactful, as the diversity of her peers meant this difference was not overly emphasized or a source of ostracization or bullying.

For other participants, encountering racial stereotypes left more of an impact. Madison (19), who has a Vietnamese mother and White father, described becoming aware of various stereotypes held about Asian people, but facing a sense of discordance comparing these views to actual Asian people in her life. She explained how encountering these beliefs from her school peers was the first time she became aware of and truly understood racial stereotypes: "there's always like that stereotype of like Asians being super smart. And I remember like people making comments and stuff about that, when they found out I was Asian. So that kind of like just brought it to me, brought it more, I guess to my understanding. Because I wasn't really aware of that until it personally happened to me when I was younger." Giving an specific example, Madison shared,

> I remember like one specific moment, it was like after math class… this kid asked me for help and I couldn't help him or something, and he was like "I thought you're supposed to be smart, you're Asian." And then I was just like, in that moment, I was just like, "Uh"

> [dragging out sound, body swaying from side to side, uncertain] Like, like I kind of was like, it was like weird because, like, I was literally like only in seventh grade, and I was like really like, come on, like… I don't know. It was just like kind of frustrating to have to even like, deal with that, but I like, still my seventh grade [self] was like, "Hey like don't, don't say stuff like that. That's just like a stereotype."

Madison was able to call out this belief as a stereotype because intellectually, she had learned about racial stereotypes, but this was one of the first times she experienced them herself. "I'd like heard about it, and seen it. Like I've heard from my mom and stuff, like her stories from childhood. But like when it happened to me, I don't know why I was so shocked, because I know it happens, but I was like, like I don't know. I wish like, I don't know, people did better." Unlike Olivia, who easily brushed off the assumption that she was supposed to like spicy food, Madison is more strongly impacted. Her frustration is clear in both her body language and speech as she recounts this event, stumbling over her words and increasing her use of the filler word "like." She recounts this middle school memory as clearly standing out in her memory. By contrast, Olivia dismisses her stereotype encounter as weird, but notes that she and her classmates, who were racially and ethnically diverse, would go on to make jokes about race and ethnicity with each other, but that these never "aimed to offend." While Olivia faced only a critique of her food preferences, Madison's White classmate questioned her intelligence, suggesting a difference in the severity of this stereotype. Finally, unlike Olivia, Madison had the context, specifically racial socialization at home in the form of bias preparation, to identify this remark as a stereotype, recognize its harm, and push back. But the encounter shakes her, and she concludes, "I wish people did better." Overall, these types of encounters with peers, particularly their "bad behavior" around race and ethnicity, was reported frequently. I conceptualize these particular interactions as not only encounters with racism or microaggressions, but opportunities to make

moral distinctions between one's own beliefs and others, and find that these could be deeply formative moments in multiracial young adults' lives, which I examine in the next section.

Negative Role Models: Moral Beliefs and Peer Interactions

Adolescence is an important period in which individuals develop their sense of morality and establish their own moral beliefs. Although the age at which individuals go through different identity development milestones varies and falls along a range of ages, it is not unreasonable to expect that individuals would go through moral belief development around the same time as particularly formative racial identity development periods. Adolescents also begin to value the views of peers over family members between ages 10 to 14 but become less susceptible to peer influence between the ages of 14 to 18 (Steinberg and Monahan 2007). In line with this development pattern, I find that the racist attitudes of peers, whether friends or school acquaintances, provided opportunities for individuals to draw distinctions between beliefs they view as correct and acceptable, versus those that are not.

Multiple individuals described interactions in which a peer's perceived immoral and/or racist beliefs sparked reflection on their own beliefs and understandings. By encountering peers who expressed undesirable moral standards, participants viewed such peers as negative role models for inaccurate, problematic beliefs and attitudes around race. Encountering these beliefs at school could be even more influential than positive racial socialization, such as bias preparation and cultural socialization from one's own families. Facing negative role models at school could also underscore the importance of familial racial socialization messages, lending weight and legitimacy to these messages. Below, I focus on the cases of two participants, who described experiences with "negative role model" peers, with respect to views on race and racism.

Multiracial young adults often described the development of their racial and ethnic identities as happening in tandem with racial, moral, and political consciousness development. For Nina (18), whose mother is White and father is Black, an unexpected diatribe from a close high school friend led her to solidify her own political beliefs and seek out education to support her beliefs in the event of any future clashes. Describing the situation, she shared, "My freshman year in high school, I had one White friend and he called me one day and was like, 'hey, I need a rant.' I'm like, 'oh, yeah. Like, what's up?' Because we're friends. He goes on this extremely transphobic, racist, homophobic rant for like an hour and a half." Nina describes her reaction as one of shock and clarity around her own views, including distancing herself from her friend's views, as a negative role model or exemplar of beliefs that are in opposition to her own. Referencing how she felt unprepared to address his points, she says, "I didn't know anything about it, but I knew what I stood for. Like I knew I wasn't homophobic. I knew I wasn't transphobic, and I knew I wasn't racist. But I didn't really know how to point those things out at the time because I just wasn't educated." Nina's stress about the conversation comes through, as she describes not knowing how to respond to her friend "spitting all these facts," while she feels that she isn't educated enough on these topics to refute his claims. To give a sense of Nina's political consciousness at this point in her life, she had yet to consider her political beliefs with respect to U.S. political parties: "I remember at one point he goes, 'So are you a Republican?' And I was like, 'I don't know.' And he then tries to tell me that I'm Republican. I remember it was just so weird." Her friend also shares racial stereotypes as fact, which Nina attempts to refute with personal experience. "And then he was telling me like, 'Oh, well, Black people act the way they act 'cause they don't got dads.' And I was like, 'I have a dad.' I was like, 'All my

siblings have dads.' Like what are you talking about? And I just remember being so, so shocked."

This interaction serves as a turning point for Nina, which pushes her to prioritize her understanding of race and politics. In the aftermath of this conversation, she says, "that's when I was like, enough is enough. I'm gonna really get educated." She credits this decision in part to her father's knowledge, and in part to a desire to defend him: "my dad's really extremely intelligent and he is a lot of the reason why I'm interested and know so much about the things that I know today and I'm so self-aware, is because of him." From that point on, she began listening to her dad's views more seriously: "when he went on his little 30-minute rant about the news, I listened. I started to listen. I started to listen to the conversations at dinner time and when we was over at my uncle's house, stuff like that, I started to listen to what they would say, what they was talking about." Listening to the topics discussed among her family members helped shape Nina's understanding of race and provided her with the knowledge to interpret the views expressed by her high school friend. She concluded this story to me with "I realized this kid is racist and I was like, this kid is horrible. And so I obviously, I stopped talking to him." For Nina, this one-sided conversation with her former friend was shocking, but hugely influential. Hearing racist views expressed by a peer she viewed favorably gave credence to her father's "30-minute rants" on social issues including racism. Although Nina may have understood the persistence of U.S. racism in the abstract, as well as some instances of lived experience, this encounter with her peer forced her to contend with a gap in her knowledge and ability to defend her racial and political views in the face of opposition. As a result, Nina is not merely a recipient of a classmate's racist diatribe, which might be classified as backstage or two-faced racism (Picca and Feagin 2007); rather, she is motivated to take action, learn more about relevant social issues,

engage with family conversations on current events, and stay informed. Nina's classmate makes the stakes clear and instills in her the importance of racial and political consciousness.

For another participant, a very similar interaction took place within college, after the 2020 protests, and caused a reexamination of the entire friendship through a new lens. Sonia (20), who has an Asian mother and White father, reported a similar falling-out with a high school friend based on the realization of racist political beliefs. Sonia's upbringing differed from Nina's in that Sonia lived and attended school in California from grades six to nine, where she had predominantly Asian school peers. She and her family moved back to Indiana, where she completed her last three years of high school. So for Sonia, living in a predominantly White neighborhoods and attending a predominantly White school was a sharp contrast from her middle school experience in California. It is within this context that Sonia described a friendship falling out. Sonia met her friend, who remains unnamed in the interview, during "youth orchestra in high school." To provide context, Sonia shared, "she's from a smaller town in Indiana. I'm not saying everyone with this background believes these things. But I know her family supported Trump [in 2016] because I visited her house and they had the bumper sticker on their car. And at the time I tried to look past that. I was like, 'oh I can be diplomatic and mature about it.'" This approach seemed successful for the majority of their relationship, with Sonia adding "I mean, we had a great friendship. She never brought up politics. I think she probably knew [supporting Trump] was controversial." The two stayed friends until both left home for college. But the viral police murder of George Floyd and subsequent nationwide protests sparked a conversation. What followed was an interaction that, to the outside eye, might sound relatively benign. However, for Sonia, this conversation served as a quiet "breaking point."

Neither Sonia nor her friend brought up George Floyd directly, and on Sonia's part, this may have been part of her attempt to remain "diplomatic and mature." It is Sonia's friend who broaches the topic, by discussing the racial justice protests, expressing a sentiment Sonia recounts as: "Oh, I heard there are like protests and looting in Indianapolis. Make sure you're careful." Sonia continued: "And then she like, I remember her calling them thugs, which kinda just… really, I don't know." At this point in the interview, Sonia places her hand on her chest. "It was just really like, because I remember it was the exact language that Donald Trump had used to describe them." She brings her hand to the side of her neck, appearing uncomfortable, and begins to stumble over her words. "So I, at the time I was like, it really just like hit a-" Here Sonia pauses briefly as she moves her hand back down over heart before resuming her story. "I don't know how to say it. Yeah. It just kinda rubbed me the wrong way, I guess." She pauses again. "Yeah. And like I'm not- I think- yeah. I think I was just kind of like disappointed that instead of bringing up how sad the whole situation was, she was kinda just like speaking negatively about the protesters." Describing the conclusion of this conversation, Sonia recalled, "I kinda just replied and was like, 'Oh, we don't know what it's like to be in their situation,' but I wasn't confrontational about it. And she just changed the topic. Like we're still- we still talked a little bit after that." The conflict in this conversation appears subtle, especially relative to stories of more blatant racism shared by other interviewees. But for Sonia, this interaction was not only distressing on its own merit, but sparked a recollection and reevaluation of their friendship overall.

This conversation took place in the summer after Sonia's first year of college but triggered memories she had previously brushed aside. "I think that interaction was kind of like a breaking point for me because," she shared, "reflecting back on the friendship, I remember there

were just- I guess maybe she just didn't realize that I was Asian the whole time or something. Like she had seen my mom before but maybe it just didn't click for her." Sonia expresses that "there are other comments that were made," but she chooses to share two examples during the interview. She described the first example in general terms: "There was somebody doing a traditional Indian dance at the [school] talent show and she was making fun of them." Sonia doesn't share additional details about this incident, but instead, moves immediately to the second example, which Sonia found more alarming. This moment occurred over a text conversation, in which Sonia's friend expressed frustration with a violin teacher. In a hushed tone, Sonia admits that her friend "called her violin teacher 'the Chinese bitch.'" placing her hands over her mouth after the profanity. While Sonia didn't confront her friend in this moment, she felt compelled to document the interaction, stating, "I have the screenshots because I was like, I don't know, I screenshotted them. I didn't do anything with them. That was even a year before this whole George Floyd thing happened."

Reflecting on these instances as a whole, Sonia mused, "I realized, like throughout the whole friendship, there were just things that I kind of let slide and I didn't stand up for myself or…tell her what she was doing was wrong. And I think also subconsciously maybe I knew not to bring up like certain things. Maybe I didn't even realize I was doing it." Rather than an explosive conflict or clear cut-off, Sonia states that she and this friend "drifted off," after what Sonia viewed as "a defining moment for [their] friendship."

Both interactions, and their impact on Nina and Sonia's beliefs and sense of self, differ from how scholars have traditionally understood ethnic-racial socialization. These circumstances did not make Nina and Sonia aware of race. Nina credits her first clear understanding of race to a racist incident experienced when stopping at a gas station with her Black father and younger

sister, which she estimates as having taken place around age 12. Sonia describes no single influential first memory of race, but developing a general awareness over time. Her earliest concrete memories of understanding race and racial difference took place when she visited Indonesia with her family as a child, around age 9. Rather than teaching Nina and Sonia about race itself, these interactions reveal the interconnected nature of race, politics, and morality. The racist beliefs and attitudes of peers serve as cautionary tales, which in the recent political climate, require a distancing from the offender.

Identity Support and Validation

Peer interactions in schools were not always negative influences, cautionary tales, or opportunities to distance one's self from others' immoral beliefs. Peers could also serve as sources of support and identity validation. As individuals move from childhood to adolescence, peer validation becomes increasingly important, and some scholars suggest that peers can become a more important reference group than family in this stage of life (Corsaro 1985; Erikson 1994; Tanner and Arnett 2016).

For some multiracial individuals, peers provided a validation of racial identity authenticity not found from other sources. Shelby (18), who has a White mother and Black father, described internalizing others' interpretations of her as White, not necessarily on the basis of skin tone, but based on the racialization of her behaviors. She shared, "When I was younger, I would view myself as White," explaining that her appearance was only one dimension and that "it was more like I was acting White." She reported repeatedly hearing messages or judgements from others that her behaviors and/or preferences were interpreted or racialized as "White." In this way, Shelby's experience can be understood as undergoing racial authenticity tests (Harris 2019), in which her claim to a racial identity is questioned as a result of her multiraciality, and

border patrolling (Mills 2017), in which her membership in a racial group is questioned. We can understand Shelby's experience through a lens of internalized racism, or more specifically, internalized monoracism, in which she accepts a multiracial microaggression, one that Harris (2017) names "Denial of a Multiracial Reality," as fact. Her collective experiences up to that point, including peer interpretations of her identity, led her to accept a monoracial imposition on her identity. However, at Shelby's last high school, a predominantly Black school in central Indiana, she turns to her friends for support. "I even talked to my friends about it," Shelby says:

> I used to literally be like, "oh, I act so White. Like I should just be White passing or something, like I should just commit to it." And I talked to my friends about it. And they were like, "you are Black and people can tell that you're Black. …You should just accept who you are."

Her friends not only affirm her Blackness but call into question the validity of boundary policing and authenticity tests, going on to say, "You are Black and you don't necessarily need to fit into the standards of it. They're not necessarily real because they're primarily stereotyping." Summing up their messages, Shelby says, "They're basically just saying, like, I should embrace the fact that I'm mixed. And I shouldn't hide that I'm Black enough to do Black things like, I don't know, get my hair braided… I shouldn't have to hold back from what I want to do because it's literally like a part of me." While dominant societal messages uphold a monoracial view of race, Shelby's friends counteract this idea, stressing that Blackness is a construction, and that the group membership border patrolling to which Shelby felt so accountable was flawed and relied heavily on racial stereotypes.

Evelynn (18, White mother and Black father) described experiencing this identity support and validation in college. When asked "do you feel like [your university] has changed the way you think about race at all?" she had a response even though she was only in her first year of

college. Evelynn shared, “Actually a little bit, yeah. I really had a hard time with my hair. My hair is like super big. When it wound up super curly, I didn't like it in school, so I'd always wear it up. Then I came here and I started to see other girls who had, like, big curly hair and wearing it down. I'm like, oh, they look pretty, like I should probably wear my hair down more. So I've definitely [gained] like an appreciation for how I look compared to before college.” For Evelynn, simply having more models of Black women wearing their hair proudly around her was validating, compared to the absence of such validation in the predominantly White Indiana schools she attended during K-12.

Other participants described receiving similar, passive forms of validation through their peers groups in K-12 schools, although the most prominent examples took place outside of Indiana. As part of the sample that had attended some or all of their K-12 schooling outside of Indiana, Sonia and Christine both spent time in California middle schools. Sonia (20, Indonesian, White) described having a large Asian friend group in during middle school, frequenting Asian businesses and restaurants together, being part of Asian American school clubs, and even bringing Asian public figures (i.e., YouTubers Wong Fu Productions) to speak at her school. Summarizing her time in California, Sonia shared, “I would say that growing up there was very influential to how I identify and how I feel like I can connect with the Asian American experience.” Reflecting on other places she had lived and speculating on different possibilities, Sonia says, “I would say that stage in my life was very influential to how I identify. I think had I grown up in Indianapolis or Chicago for the rest of my life, I don't think I would've identified the same way I do now.” Although she moved to Indiana for the latter half of high school and stayed for college, having foundational experiences with Asian American peer groups instilled in her a strong sense of Asian American identity.

Similarly, Christine (21, Chinese, White) described hanging out with an "Asian and ethnic crowd" in her California middle school: "I think that that experience like, just kind of really solidified my identity as an Asian American woman." She described previously living in a "relatively small suburban town" prior to middle school, where she reported that her parents "did have some experience with a little backlash of being a mixed-race couple." However, moving to a larger city during middle school, as well as a wealthier, better resourced school system, enabled her to connect with Asian peers and explore her identity in multi-faceted ways. Christine noted that she and her peers, "talked a lot about our shared experiences as Asian or ethnic people and I went on a school trip with a lot of them to China for our Chinese class. And so there, we learned a lot about culture and we practiced the language and so, that felt just like… we're appreciating the culture and we all felt like we identified with each other in that way. …I feel like that kind of experience with all of them kind of made me feel very connected with that background." Reflecting in a similar manner to Sonia, she says, "if I had maybe stayed in my small town, in a public [school], it would have been like, yeah, I look different, but I'm basically the same as everyone else." Here, Christine seems to suggest that without Asian peers and opportunities such as her Chinese class's trip to China, she might not have identified strongly with her Asian and Chinese identity. While this is speculation—and Christine's account of her home life and speaking Chinese (Mandarin) with her mother and sisters suggests this might not be the case—Christine nonetheless viewed her school peers as strongly influential to and affirming of her sense of her Chinese identity.

Finally, Camila (21, White mother and biracial Mexican/White father) described validation from a friend group that includes several multiracial peers in college. As an anthropology major interested in topics like racism and colonialism, Camila's interview includes

reflections on the connections between her ancestry and colonialism. She details her conflicted feelings on the double-sided nature of White privilege, with phrases like: “Life is so much easier for me because I'm White, which is horrible.” Conflicted emotions like guilt come out clearly in Camila’s account: “I wish I wasn't as White as I am, but also, of course I do. …if I wasn't, my life would be much, much, much more difficult.” However, she went on to describe a group of friends with whom she grappled with social issues and conflicting emotions together, sharing, “a lot of my friends who consider themselves or identify themselves as White presenting, oh we have this conversation quite often. And they're in the same boat kind of, where it's like. It's ‘nice’ [exaggerated air quotes]. I don’t know another way to put it.” After additional reflection on this topic, Camila and I had the following exchange:

> Interviewer: But it sounds like at least you have some friends that are in similar positions. And you can talk it through with them, even if there's not a resolution or you know, something you can do about it.
>
> Camila: Yeah, that's always really, really helpful. And it's always really sweet because a lot of times it's like friends’ parents who like ask because they know that it's probably bothering me or that something has happened and that I definitely don't talk about it. And that is something that has been very helpful.

While this mention is brief, Camila alludes to a support system of not only her peers, but by extension her friends’ parents. She concludes by once again confirming that her friends have been sources of support and validation: “I've actually never ever, ever been discouraged, only encouraged by my friends, especially my friends who were Hispanic, and all of my friends who are either multiracial or people of color, to mark both.” Ochoa (2013) identified student groups as agentic spaces to create “transformative spaces” of resistance, particularly for Latiné students in southern California (206). Multiracial students, particularly in Indiana, may not necessarily have the numbers to create these types of student groups. Nonetheless, they drew on social

networks, particularly a broad racial coalition of school peers and friends, to navigate race, identity, and multiraciality.

Conclusion

Ultimately, multiracial students recognize the inadequacy of race education in their schooling, find that their lived experiences contradict the explicit dismissal of race in schools, and seek out alternative avenues for knowledge and social support with respect to race. Mueller (2017) discusses colorblindness as an active construction, maintained and achieved by Whites. Despite schools' best efforts to "achieve" colorblindness, for many multiracial students, these messages fall flat when compared to their lived experiences within schools. Multiracial individuals experience racial socialization in schools through absent or inadequate instruction and curriculum on race, which is paired with implicit messages that race and racism are unimportant and/or irrelevant topics of study. Further, students experience racialization through school structures and in peer interactions, which underscore the inadequacy of schools' attempts to downplay race.

Additionally, both racist and supportive interactions with peers play a powerful role in shaping multiracial individuals' understandings of race. Peers' expressions of racism could prompt multiracial young adults to develop and/or further their racial and political consciousness and reiterate their moral stances with respect to race and politics. These findings extend empirical research that stops at the documentation of racism and racialization in schools to examine how students *respond* to racist interactions.

In this study's sample, multiracial students describe being shaped by racial justice movements in the early 2020s, including Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate. Within these

contexts, young adults described racist peer interactions as moments that led them to become more informed about modern-day racism and draw boundaries between themselves and these peers, a delineation that sometimes took the form of cutting off friendships. Students of color, including multiracial students, are not merely passive recipients or victims of racism and racialization in schools. By focusing on the voices and agency of multiracial students, I suggest that this drawing of moral boundaries, as young adults develop racial and political consciousness, operates as a way for multiracial individuals to protect themselves from experiences with racism and may also reveal one way in which increasing polarization in the U.S. population takes place at the micro-level.

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Conclusion

Findings Summary

This dissertation examined how multiracial individuals navigate race, racism, and identity in the context of Whiteness, family, and education. With respect to Whiteness, I move beyond arguments that multiracial individuals either are or are not "becoming White" to show that multiracial individuals experience simultaneous benefits (wages) and harms (taxes) for their proximity to Whiteness. Multiracial individuals who are seen as White, at least some of the time, also experience Whiteness as a "contingent status," akin to inconsistent racial appraisals (Sims 2016), in which they cannot necessarily predict when they will or will not receive the wages of Whiteness (Du Bois 1935). Identifying these tensions moves beyond research that has focused on Whiteness as an identity outcome to instead examine how race is experienced, which is not a foregone conclusion for multiracial populations. The potentially contradictory experiences of multiracial individuals might be accounted for with a "multiracial paradigm" of race, in contrast to prevailing considerations of race through a monoracial paradigm.

Regarding family, I focus on bidirectional ethnic-racial socialization to argue that multiracial children engage in the socialization of monoracial parents, particularly monoracial White and politically conservative fathers. This pattern speaks to the agency of multiracial children and the hidden labor they perform within the family, which can continue into young adulthood, as well as emphasizing the misplaced nature of "multiracial progress narratives" that assume progressiveness and anti-racism is an automatic occurrence in interracial relationships and multiracial families. This chapter contributes to literature that acknowledges ethnic-racial socialization is a bidirectional process (Hughes et al. 2006; Song 2017) yet lacks empirical research on how children actively engage in socialization themselves. The agency and hidden

labor of multiracial children is one potential mechanism through which generational social change takes place.

With respect to education, I find that multiracial students report a dismissal of race and racism in their formal schooling, alongside clear racialization in school contexts (i.e., from teachers, staff, and school policies). However, school peers complicate how multiracial individuals experience race in schools, at times being a source of support and identity validation, and at others, operating as negative role models against which multiracial young adults develop and/or refine their racial and political consciousness as young adults. This chapter extends research that documents and details the *existence* of racist and/or microaggressive encounters within schools by examining how "victims" of these incidents *respond* to these incidents. Within this study, multiracial students exercised agency to establish themselves as distinct from racist peers and acted to protect themselves, as well as assert a moral, socially progressive stance, by cutting off these friendships. Implications of this pattern suggest that this is one way that polarization is taking place among young adults today.

Future Research

Future research in this area will include the analysis of photographic data and the use of arts-based methods of research analysis and presentation, which ultimately fell outside of the scope of this dissertation. This project included participant-provided photographs elicited during interviews. A total of 107 photos were shared across 40 individuals. Among the 15 individuals who did not share a photo, five shared photo descriptions (i.e., a photo they did not have on hand or describing a hypothetical photo they view as representing their multiracial identity).

I used photo elicitation as a method that allowed participants to talk about multiracial identity with a visual aid. I shared information about the photo option using the email text below, once participants had confirmed an interview date and time:

> **Photo Sharing Option**
> I am also inviting interviewees to participate in a photo sharing section of the interview. This would involve you selecting a photo (or a few) and talking through how they relate to multiracial identity. Showing a photo isn't required, but some people find it helpful to show photos when talking about friends, family members, or how appearance relates to their identity.
>
> If you decide to share a photo during the interview, it won't be shared with anyone besides me. I hope to draw on both interview data and photos to produce not only academic texts, but artwork as the final product of this research (see an example here, if interested).

In most cases, participants led the conversation around photos without being asked additional questions. However, when additional prompting was needed, I asked participants to explain who and/or what is captured in their photos and why they chose this photo (or photos) in relation to multiracial identity. Photos proved to be a useful tool for discussing race and different dimensions of appearance. Participants used photos to discuss skin tone, facial features, and hair texture and style. Photographs commonly featured multiple people, allowing participants to talk through the relative and contextual nature of race, such as how they are perceived differently than family members or friend groups. The types/nature of photographs that participants choose to share is another form of data. For example, photographs with family were the most common, suggesting that family members act as a lens through which individuals understand their own racial position. In many ways, photographs provide an ideal avenue for studying race, which is experienced and interpreted primarily through visual means.

There is a long tradition of using photographs within ethnographic work and supplementing interviews with photographic data, or vice versa (Collier and Collier 1986). Photo

elicitation asks interviewees to share existing photos (Clark-IbáÑez 2004; Richard and and Lahman 2015) and photovoice asks participants to make photos for a study, as a form of participatory research (Latz 2017; Wang and Burris 1997). While these methods are now commonly accepted in qualitative research, Vellanki and Davesar (2020) argue for the need to think beyond established methods like photovoice and their underlying epistemologies to consider a diversity of visual methodologies. Similarly, it is important to adapt a study's methods to the intended purpose of the research, aligning methods with methodology, epistemologies, and theoretical frameworks (Bhattacharya 2013). Beyond photography, a growing body of research employs arts-based methods, from artwork to music to dance (Carson 2016; Leavy 2020; Sousanis 2015). These methods draw on multiple ways of knowing, going beyond the prioritization of textual/language-based knowledge inherent in mainstream academic research (Becker 2000; Leavy 2020). Arts-based research (ABR) can refer to many approaches; my work will use an *art in research* approach, in which "art is actively applied by participants and/or artist-researchers as a creative process in one or more phases of a research process" (Wang et al. 2017:15). Sociological studies on race that use visual methods include Kaplan's (2013) photovoice study on inner-city Black and Latiné youth, and Vega's (2023) study of how children of immigrants process experiences with deportation with art. Arts-based research publications have also served as a means to communicate key research findings about the COVID-19 pandemic to a wide audience, such as the unique challenges of pandemic parenting (Heilman and Calarco 2022) and the disparities produced by racial capitalism (Pirtle and Thompson 2022).

In this line of future research, first, I will produce researcher-generated artwork based on data analysis of photographs from this study. In a second stage, I plan to incorporate participatory methods into ABR. This component would entail holding focus groups with

different racial ancestry groups, focusing first on multiracial Black, Asian, and Latiné ancestry groups, and if numbers permit, Native and MENA ancestry groups. These groups will meet at least twice. Initial meetings would prioritize building rapport and discussing shared and divergent experiences with racial identity. Subsequent meetings would involve asking participants to view and discuss researcher-produced artwork, offer validation and/or reflections on differences from their own experiences, and inviting participants to engage in their own art-making to make sense of their experiences.

Practical and Policy Implications

In many ways, this study affirms the effectiveness and severity of emerging executive orders and legislation taking place in the U.S. in 2025. In 2022, policy advocate Heather McGee and sociologist Victor Ray published an op-ed in the *New York Times*, in which they warned: "If an educated citizenry makes democracy possible, attacking schools becomes a proxy war to limit democracy" (McGhee and Ray 2022). This essay, titled "School Is for Making Citizens," was a response to increasing attacks on the supposed teaching of CRT (Critical Race Theory) in schools, calls for curriculum surveillance, and book bans. As of this writing, the state of U.S. education, and more broadly, U.S. democracy, appears even more dire. Threats to dismantle the Department of Education, scale back the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and explicitly strive to be a "colorblind society" (Exec. Order 14281 2025) are only a fraction of the changes proposed by the current administration. Yet, multiracial young adults in my study overwhelmingly report a notable absence of education on race; families that may not understand race, racism, or multiraciality themselves; and conflicting experiences with Whiteness that they often navigate alone. Sonia, a 20-year-old college junior who was the first interviewee for this study, asked tentatively after our interview if she could ask me, as another person with Asian and White

ancestry, how I was processing the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting that killed six Asian women. Recording devices shut off, we shared reactions, frustrations, and, after having spent an hour and a half discussing *her* identity and experiences for this study, turned the tables for her to ask questions about my multiracial experiences. Before signing off, Sonia asked if I knew of any local spaces where she could have similar conversations with other multiracial people. Regretfully, I did not.

In her review article of multiracial students' K-12 ethnic-racial socialization experiences, Jackie Peng (2024) argues that schools should "support the development of multiracial children in ways that account for racial realities, disrupt white supremacist logics, and bring about a more just society" (13). Peng's recommendations appear straightforward and reasonable. However, against the backdrop of interviewees' reported schooling experiences, including Sonia's, an education that accounts for multiracial experiences began to sound almost impossible, even to me as the researcher. When asked how they felt about their education on race, and whether there was anything they wished they would have been taught, not a single participant in this study imagined that their education could include a consideration of multiracial identities and experiences. Instead, their requests were modest. Some expressed an interest in learning about more cultures outside of the U.S. Others shared a desire to learn more about their specific monoracial ancestries (i.e., Asian, Latiné) and histories. Another group critiqued the "surface" level, "whitewashed," and overly positive coverage of American racism, suggesting an emphasis on racial progress was the norm, yet did not seem to expect their schools could ever be expected to teach a clear account of America's racial histories.

Proposing recommendations for improved race education in the current political climate feels like a futile effort and maintaining the optimism to expect they might someday be

implemented a herculean task. Yet perhaps it is the role of the researcher to demonstrate the urgency and need to fight for better futures, the role of artists to create visions of these futures, and the role of activists to implement the ground-level changes to get us there. In this text, I occupy my role as a researcher and offer the following takeaways:

1. **Comprehensive K-12 Education on Race and Racism.** Comprehensive education on race and racism in K-12 schools is crucial. In contrast to narratives about the proliferation of "CRT" and "DEI" in schools, including biased, commissioned research studies,[3] multiracial young adults (two-thirds of whom attended K-12 schools in Indiana, one-third outside of Indiana) overwhelming reported very little education on race and racism. Removing race from school curricula does the U.S. public a grave disservice, suppressing opportunities to learn from racist histories, reducing chances to understand the position of peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and leaving multiracial and monoracial students of color to navigate racism from school systems, teachers, peers, and/or other sources on their own. Without education, U.S. racial divides will only grow and the color line will remain an enduring problem of our century (Du Bois 1903).
    a. Education on race must include Whiteness. Educators should strive to refute assumptions that Whiteness is invisible and normative, as well as establish distinctions between White identity and Whiteness as a structure.
    b. Educators can provide opportunities for individualized education through avenues such as open-ended assignments that allow K-12 and college students to explore

[3] For coverage of one example, see Toldson, Ivory A. 2022. "New Study Reveals the Anti-CRT Agenda is Really about Denying Racism and Revising History," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*. https://www.diverseeducation.com/opinion/article/15302120/new-study-reveals-the-anticrt-agenda-is-really-about-denying-racism-and-revising-history

their own topics of interest. Multiracial young adults who reported receiving these opportunities, particularly in middle and high school, expressed that these assignments could be formative for identity development and provided a structure through which they could explore connections between family ancestry and historical events.

2. **Strong Teacher Training on Race and Racism.** Teachers must have strong training in race and racism themselves. Teachers who may never have received this education themselves cannot be expected to do an adequate job teaching children about these topics. Indeed, some multiracial young adults' accounts of teacher attitudes around race are appalling. But focus must also be given not only teaching harsh histories but in guiding students through these topics with care. Histories of resistance, social progress, as well as historical and modern-day role models from a range of racial and ethnic ancestries are topics that can be easily implemented. While there is no single solution or pedagogical approach for how to best tackle challenging topics in the classroom, I argue this is an area of pedagogy worth just as much investment as the use of AI in the classroom.
3. **Facilitation and Support of Community Third Spaces.** Third spaces for discussion and community connection may make up for a lack of ethnic-racial socialization among families and/or within schools. Third spaces in the U.S. have been declining for decades (Putnam 2001), and public discussions on the "loneliness epidemic" abound, particularly for men. Multiracial young adults described experiences of isolation and a desire for spaces to connect and discuss topics around identity. Some were able to find connections, validation, and/or learn about racial groups other than their own through family friends or the parents of their peers. College can also provide possible structures through clubs and

interest groups, but for individuals who do not attend college, and college graduates, community third spaces could provide much needed, intergenerational avenues to continue discussions about identity, race, and racism.

   a. Public investment in spaces like libraries, with free public space and programming can help fill this need. College and universities can also take seriously their missions to provide public education and contribute to the public good to offer events open to the public, including on difficult topics like racism, and community discussions designed to not only share knowledge but encourage the participation of wider communities. Spaces like the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association Conference, held once every two years, is one such example, as a structure that brings together scholars, artists, and interested community members. However, there is work to be done to create more local, accessible spaces.

4. **Shifting Cultural Norms and Media Representation.** While cultural norms may be seen as an abstract social force, political extremists often take deliberate, calculated steps to manufacture the spread of their viewpoints. For example, alt-right and "men's rights activist" groups have been successful at targeting prepubescent and adolescent boys through avenues such as YouTube, podcasts, and gaming channels. While the ethics of deliberate manipulation are questionable, there is space to model inclusive practices through media. Multiracial representation in films, books, music, and video games is growing, and creators should continue to prioritize diverse voices, both so that minoritized groups can see themselves represented and so that other groups can witness, listen, and learn. For multiracial young adults growing up in Indiana, where spaces with

diverse racial and ethnic representation can be rare, many turned to online media and online communities to explore their own identities. Continuing to showcase diverse, varied identities and experiences through both traditional media and newer media formats like podcasts and social media short-form videos (i.e., TikTok), is perhaps more important now than ever.

5. **Development of a Multiracial Paradigm.** Studying race without inadvertently reifying it, or implying race is an innate or essential category and that racial inequalities are natural, is always a point of concern for race scholars. Empirical research must strike a balance between observing existing patterns in the social world, while not assuming those patterns are fixed and stable. While monoracial frameworks remain a dominant structure in how race is understood and experienced by many, this lens is insufficient to fully understand multiracial experiences. Thus, I urge scholars to build toward the development of a multiracial paradigm, which holds that multiple and potentially contradictory experiences with race and racism are possible, and move beyond arguments that interpret multiracial individuals only through a monoracial lens.

To study multiraciality is to continually reject a scarcity-based approach to race research, one which suggests that since racism for monoracial people has yet to be resolved, a focus on multiracial populations serves as a distraction from more pressing issues. Yet, scholars, activists, and scholar-activists, have long called for a multi-dimensional approach to addressing society's inequalities, from the oft-quoted maxim "none of are free until all of us are free," attributed to Jewish-American poet Emma Lazarus but popularized in part by Maya Angelou, to Audre Lorde's (1984) proclamation that "there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not

live single-issue lives." It is my hope that this research offers one incremental step in our broader, intersecting fights for social change.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Flier.

Appendix B. Study Information Sheet.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

Multiracial Identity Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Scientists do research to answer important questions that might help change or improve the way we do things in the future. This document will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want to participate. Please read this form, and ask any questions you have, before agreeing to be in the study.

All research is voluntary. You can choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind later and leave the study at any time. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits if you decide not to participate or choose to leave the study later.

This research is intended for individual 18 years of age or older. If you are under age 18, do not complete the survey.

This research is for residents of the United States. If you are not a U.S. resident, do not complete the survey.

The purpose of this study is to understand how multiracial college students experience race and their racial identities. In particular, this study focuses on how college experiences may influence multiracial identity.

We are asking you if you want to be in this study because you may self-identify as multiracial or biracial, *or* have parents with two or more different racial ancestries. The study is being conducted by Monica Heilman at the Indiana University Bloomington Sociology department.

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things.

- Complete a screening survey that will take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete to determine your eligibility.
- Participate in an interview by either phone or video conference software (i.e. Zoom) that will take approximately 60-90 minutes.
- Potentially participate in no more than two follow-up interviews, lasting 30-60 minutes each, only if follow-up questions arise and you have agreed to take part in follow-up interviews. You will be asked if you are willing to be contacted for follow-up interviews at the end of the first interview. Requests for follow-up interviews will be made within 1 year. You will not be contacted beyond this point.

Before agreeing to participate, please consider the risks and potential benefits of taking part in this study.

You may be uncomfortable while answering survey or interview questions. While completing the survey, you can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. While participating in the interview, you are also free to skip any questions you do not want to answer or end the interview at any time.

There is a risk someone outside the study team could get access to your research information from this study. More information about how we will protect your information to reduce this risk is below.

- Any audio recordings of your interview(s) will be stored in a secure, password-protected cloud server.
- Any individual files that contain identifying information will also be password-protected.
- Audio recordings will be transcribed and any identifying information, including your name and the names of any individuals you mention, will be removed from the written document.

We don't think you will have any personal benefits from taking part in this study, but we hope to learn things that will help researchers in the future.

You will be paid $25 for participating in this study. If eligible for the study, payment will take place after the completion of the interview. You will not be paid for completing this screening survey. Any follow-up interviews or communications are completely voluntary. This study is funded by the Indiana University Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, and Indiana University Asian American Studies Program. There is no cost to participate in the study.

We will protect your information and make every effort to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. No information which could identify you will be shared in publications about this study. Only the primary researcher, Monica Heilman, will have access to audio recordings of your interview. Recordings will be destroyed at the completion of this study, after three years.

Your personal information may be shared outside the research study if required by law. We also may need to share your research records with other groups for quality assurance or data analysis. These groups include the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its

designees, and state or federal agencies who may need to access the research records (as allowed by law).

If you have questions about the study or encounter a problem with the research, contact the researcher, Monica Heilman at racialidentitystudy@gmail.com.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the IU Human Research Protection Program office at 800-696-2949 or at irb@iu.edu.

IU IRB #10541 Updated 11-16-21

Appendix C. Screening Survey.

[Study Information Sheet here]

[survey page 1]

1. What is your race/ethnicity? (check all that apply)
    a. White
    b. Black
    c. Asian
    d. Latino/a or Hispanic
    e. American Indian or Alaska Native
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. Some other race (please specify)
2. If you are aware of them, what are your specific ethnicities or ancestries? For example, Ethiopian, Irish, Vietnamese, Puerto Rican, Cherokee.
3. What is your mother/Parent 1's race/ethnicity?
    a. White
    b. Black
    c. Asian
    d. Latino/a or Hispanic
    e. American Indian or Alaska Native
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. Some other race (please specify)
4. What is your father/Parent 2's race/ethnicity?
    a. White
    b. Black
    c. Asian
    d. Latino/a or Hispanic
    e. American Indian or Alaska Native
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. Some other race (please specify)

[survey page 2]

5. What is your age? [open]
6. Where were you born?
    a. City [open]
    b. State (if applicable)
        i. [list of 50 states]
        ii. US territory or outside of US (please specify in next question)
    c. If you marked "US territory or outside of US," please specify: [open]
7. Where did you grow up (spend the majority of your childhood)? [open]
    a. If you grew up in more than one place, where else did you grow up? [open]

8. How long have you lived or attended college in Bloomington?
9. Are you a full-time student? Y/N
10. What is your major?
11. Do you hold any jobs during the school year? Y/N
12. How would you describe your gender?
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Non-binary or non-conforming
    d. Other (please specify):
13. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
    a. Heterosexual or straight
    b. Gay
    c. Lesbian
    d. Bisexual or Pansexual
    e. Asexual
    f. Questioning
    g. Other (please specify):
14. Do you consider yourself transgender? Y/N
    a. If yes, are you:
        i. Transgender, male to female
        ii. Transgender, female to male
        iii. Transgender, gender non-conforming
15. What is your relationship/martial status?
    a. Not in a relationship and never married
    b. In a relationship but not living together
    c. Cohabiting (living together but not married)
    d. Married
    e. Separated
    f. Divorced
    g. Widowed
16. Do you hold any of these religious beliefs?
    a. Protestant Christian
    b. Catholic
    c. Jewish
    d. Muslim
    e. Buddhist
    f. Hindu
    g. Folk religion
    h. Atheist
    i. Agonistic
    j. Other (please specify):
    k. None
17. What is your family's household income?

a. Below $20,000
b. $20,000 to $19,000
c. $40,000 to $59,000
d. $60,000 to $79,000
e. $80,000 to $99,000
f. $100,000 to $200,000
g. Over $200,000
h. Don't know/prefer not to answer

18. What is the highest level of education your mother/Parent 1 has completed?
    a. High school
    b. Some college
    c. Associate's degree or certificate program
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Master's degree
    f. PhD, JD, MD or other professional degree
19. What is your mother/Parent 1's current occupation?
20. What is the highest level of education your father/Parent 2 has completed?
    a. High school
    b. Some college
    c. Associate's degree or certificate program
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Master's degree
    f. PhD, JD, MD or other professional degree
21. What is your father/Parent 2's current occupation?

Appendix D. Interview guide.

Multiracial Identity Study
Interview Guide

The purpose of this study is to understand how multiracial/mixed-race people identify and what influences their identity. I'll ask you a series of open-ended questions about experiences that may have shaped your identity. The interview will take about 60 minutes, but you're welcome to skip any questions you don't want to answer or end the interview at any time. If it's okay with you, I'll record the interview so I can focus on what you're saying instead of taking notes. When we're done, I'll transcribe the interview and remove your name and any identifying information. Your name won't be used in anything published from this study.

- Any time constraints? I want to be respectful of your time. To be honest we might not get through all of the questions I sent you, and that's perfectly fine. But if there are questions you really want to talk about, I'll make sure we get to those.

- Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

- Is it okay for me to record our conversation using Zoom? (I am only using the audio, but no way to record audio without video on Zoom.)

[Begin recording, Zoom + backup audio recorder.]

I've given you a broad description of the study, but I'm interested in this topic because I'm also multiracial – Korean and White – and growing up I just didn't hear people talking about it. I've done a previous study where I interviewed 30 multiracial young adults. This current study is builds off that to learn more and learn about how identity might be different in different locations.

I. Racial/Ethnic Identity

To start, I want to ask more about your identity, since I know it can be much more complicated than what's captured on a survey.

1. How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? Please feel free to include as much detail/context as you'd like.

2. How would you describe your family's racial/ethnic background? (Keep impact of parent's gender on ID in mind.)

    a. Mother's race/ethnicity
    b. Father's race/ethnicity

3. Next, I want to get at your personal identity. How important is race to your identity? Which racial identity (or identities) are most important to you? Why/what influenced?

    a. How is your racial identity tied to your appearance? (Skin tone, eye color) (later)

4. What do you usually mark on survey questions about race?

    a. …when you can only check one box? (Have you done surveys like this?)

    b. …when you can check multiple boxes?

5. Can you tell me about the last time you had to mark your race on a survey? How did you decide what to mark? (Probe: can you tell me about a time when you had to mark race on a survey that stands out in your memory?)

6. If a survey included an open-ended question asking you what your race is, what would you write? (Probes: Why? Do you always write the same thing? / Are there times when you choose to mark a different choice than usual?)

7. *If Q6 is different from Q4*, why do you mark __ instead of ___?
(Probe: Talk me through your thought process. Why wouldn't you choose [alternatives]? How do you feel about this choice?)

II. Childhood Experiences

8. I'm interested in how your childhood experiences might have shaped your views of, and experiences with, race. Could you walk me through where you grew up and what it was like?

    a. What was the racial makeup of your neighborhood and schools?
        i. Where there any differences in elementary, middle, and high school?

    b. Who were the people you spent the most time with growing up?
        i. Did these change as you grew up?

9. Can you remember the time when you first became aware of your race? (Others' race? Race in general?)

    a. Probes: Do you have early childhood memories related to race?

b. In your neighborhood, schools, and community groups, did you ever stand out for your race? Did you pass as a single race in these settings?

10. How much/often were you aware of race in your childhood? What kinds of things made/kept you aware of race?

11. What was it like growing up in a multi-racial/ethnic household? *If already answered/Probes:*

    Did your parents/household ever talk about race? If yes, what did they say? If not, why do you think they didn't talk about it?

    a. Explain your multiracial background to you?

    b. Teach about racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds?

    c. Bring up race casually? (Joke about race? Make light of it? Make offensive remarks?)

    d. Many people who previously hadn't talked about race begin to have conversations about it after big national events, such as the death of Trayvon Martin or when Black Lives Matter protests made the news. Did race ever come up in your family through news or politics like this?

        i. Current day/moment? (any recent conversations about race with family after George Floyd and 2020 summer protests)
        (Atlanta shooting, but only if they are willing.)

12. Did you ever talk about race with extended family? (cousins, grandparents, uncles and aunts) (other side of your family?) If yes, what did they say? If not, why do you think they didn't talk about it?

    a. Explain your multiracial background to you?

    b. Teach about racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds?

    c. Bring up race casually?
    (Joke about race? Make light of it? Make offensive remarks?)

    d. Discuss race in the news or related to politics? Current day/moment?

13. Did you attend any social/community groups growing up? Extracurricular groups? Religious groups? (If so, what was the racial makeup?) What were your experiences in these groups?

14. You told me a little about your childhood and the neighborhood you grew up in, I'd like to focus more specifically now on your experiences in school. Could you walk me through what it was like to be [race/ethnicity] at school prior to coming to IU?

    a. In your K-12 education, do you ever remember learning about race? (In roughly which grade? How often/much? What did you cover?)

15. Do you remember race coming up in informal conversations with classmates? During other school related activities (sports, theatre, etc.)? If yes, what was said?

16. How do you feel about the education you received when comes to race?

    a. Did you feel your education about race (at home and school) was enough?

    b. Do you believe there were any gaps in your education about race? (Did you feel your knowledge was enough/lacking? Do you wish you'd learned more about anything in particular?)

    c. What do you wish you would've been taught? What would you want your kid in school to learn about race?

III. College Experiences

17. How did you come to be a student at IU? (How long have you lived in Bloomington? Indiana? Midwest?)

    a. How long have you been at IU? (What year in school?)

    b. What is your major(s)? Minor(s)? (Probe: Is there a typical [major] student at IU and how would you describe them? i.e. gender, race/ethnicity; diversity in program, major classes, other classes?)

    c. Are you active in any extracurricular activities right now? (Are there extracurricular activities that you've done at IU but are not active in now?)

        a. Does/has race come up in those contexts?

b. Are you involved in any groups or clubs related to your racial or ethnic identity?

    i. Why did you decide to join/participate?
    ii. What are those meetings/interactions usually like?
    iii. Does [group/club] influence how you see your racial/ethnic identity?

18. People have different views on the racial diversity at IU based on where they've lived before (i.e. big cities, rural small town). From your perspective, how would you describe the racial makeup of IU?

    a. (How do you think things would be different here if IU had more people of color?)

    b. How does the racial makeup of IU/Bloomington/Indiana compare to where you grew up? (How different or similar? What impact has that had on your experiences with, and understandings of, race/ethnicity?)

19. Have you taken any college courses that addressed race? How have they influenced how you view or understand race, if at all? (Probes: How did you decide to take this course/these courses? What did you learn? Was the information new?)

20. What has it been like making friends at IU? Who do you spend the most time with? (Probes: What is the racial makeup of your friend group(s) at IU? Is this intentional/why do you usually spend the most time with them?)

    a. How does the racial makeup of your friend group at IU differ from the friendships you developed before IU?

    b. Does race come up with your IU friends? Do you talk about race? If so, how does it usually come up?
        i. Did you talk about George Floyd and the protests last summer? How did those conversations go?

21. How do you racially identify around your friends? (Around different friend groups?)

    a. How do think your friends view your race (or racial identity)?

22. Has race influenced dating, either at IU or before you began college? How so? How have you considered race in your dating experiences (preferences, attractiveness, parent/family expectations)?

23. Has being at IU changed how you think about race? How so? Or have you changed the way you think about race while attending IU? Your thoughts on how you personally identify?

    a. Experiences in the classroom? (Does your race stand out? Do you notice other classmates standing out?)

    b. Is there anything about IU that has helped you better understand race or your own racial identity? (Positive experiences with race?)

    c. Is there anything about IU that has made your experience more challenging?

        i. How do you try to address those challenges? (i.e., joining student groups, online communities, visiting more diverse places like Indianapolis)

24. A lot has changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. How, if at all, has the pandemic impacted your experiences with race now that school is hybrid? (For example, being in asynchronous classes, or not having to turn on your video; race being more or less obvious; differences in how professors/peers interact in virtual classrooms)

25. Is anything else you would like to add about how the COVID-19 pandemic (if mentioned: or the 2020 racial justice protests influenced how you view race or your racial identity?)

IV. Race in Interactions / Relationships

Next, I'm going to ask about the interactions you've had with others related to race. Considering both your experiences at IU and before coming to IU…

26. What race do others seem to view you as? / How do most people seem to view your race? (Is there a "most" or does it vary too much?)

27. Do you think others usually notice your race? (Do they comment on it or ask about it?)

    a. Can you describe a time when someone noticed or commented on your race?

b. Do people ask you what race you are? What do you think usually triggers this question? What questions do they use to ask you?

c. How does that interaction usually go? /Can you describe a time when this happened to you?

i. How do you usually describe your race when someone asks?

28. Some multiracial people talk about how others see them as White, so they "pass" as White. Others are unsure or pass in some situations but not others. Would you say pass as White? (Sometimes pass as White? What percent of the time would you say you pass as White? (or confirm, so you can pass as White 0% of the time) How do you feel about this? How does it feel to pass/not pass?

a. Can you describe a time when you "passed" as White /as a POC?

b. Have you noticed patterns in when you pass as White vs not?

29. Racial identity can be complicated. Some interviewees have talked about feeling White (or "culturally White") even if they don't appear (pass as/look) White. To what extent do you identify as White? What does this mean to you?

a. To what extent do you feel you *can* identify as White?

Concluding Questions

30. What (if any) are the challenges you face being multiracial?

31. What advice would you give to someone who's struggling with their multiracial identity/having multiple ancestries?

32. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience being multiracial?

a. Is there anything else you expected me to ask that I didn't? (If yes, what was this? What would you have said?)

Monica Heilman

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Education

Ph.D. Sociology, Indiana University Bloomington 2025
Dissertation: "Morally Fraught Identities: How Multiracial Individuals Navigate Race and Whiteness"
Committee: Dina Okamoto (co-chair), Jessica Calarco (co-chair), Jennifer C. Lee, Hyeyoung Kwon, Sylvia Martinez (School of Education)
Ph.D. Minor: Social Science Research Methods (qualitative focus)

M.A. Sociology, Indiana University Bloomington 2020
Thesis: "Intentional Inconsistencies: How Multiracial Individuals Craft 'Racial Elevator Speeches' to Mitigate Racial Microaggressions"

B.A. University of Denver, Sociology (with Honors), Art, *Magna Cum Laude* 2014

Research Interests

Race and Ethnicity, Multiraciality, Social Inequality, Family, Education, Qualitative Methodology, Arts-based Research

Publications

Heilman, Monica. 2022. "The Racial Elevator Speech: How Multiracial Individuals Respond to Racial Identity Inquiries." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 8(3):370–85.

Heilman, Monica and Jessica Calarco. 2022. "Home is Where it Happens: A Visual Essay on Pandemic Parenting for Employed Mothers." *Visual Studies* 38(3–4):571–74.

Heilman, Monica. 2020. "Halmoni" and "Paternal Grandmother." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23(3):319-321.

Other Publications

Osili, Una, [et al. including Monica Heilman] 2023. "Latinx Philanthropy: Understanding Generosity Trends Across Latinx Communities in the U.S." *Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.* (Report)

Osili, Una, [et al. including Monica Heilman] 2021. "Everyday Donors of Color: Diverse Philanthropy During Times of Change." *Lilly Family School of Philanthropy*. (Report)

Papers Under Review

Heilman, Monica. "Multiracial Young Adults' Experiences of Whiteness as a Wage, Tax, and Contingent Status." *(revise and resubmit)*

Papers In Progress

Heilman, Monica and Lisa Martinez. "Racial Reminders and References: Interactions that Shape Racial Identity Prominence for Multiracial Individuals." *(manuscript available upon request)*

Heilman, Monica. "'I love him but sometimes he doesn't understand race': The Hidden Labor of Children in Multiracial Families."

Marrow, Helen B., Dina G. Okamoto, and Monica Heilman. "Security Threats, Discomfort, and the Meanings of Racially-Diverse Neighborhoods for U.S.-Born Whites"

Li, Pei-Jung and Monica Heilman. "Reimagining Research: Applying Creative Inquiry to Represent the Experiences of Asian International and Multiracial Students."

Heilman, Monica. "Analyzing with Art: Sketching as Visual Memos."

Fellowships, Grants, & Honors

2024	Seidler Graduate Paper Competition Award, Third Place, North Central Sociological Association (NCSA)
2023-24	President's Diversity Dissertation Fellowship, University Graduate School, Indiana University
2023-24	Philanthropic Educational Organization (P.E.O.) Scholar Award, International Chapter of P.E.O. Sisterhood
2023-24	Lindesmith-Mullins Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Indiana University
2019, 22-24	Conference Travel Grant, Department of Sociology, Indiana University
2022	Graduate & Professional Student Government Research Award, Indiana University
2021	Graduate Student Research Grant, Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, Indiana University
2021	Asian American Studies Graduate Research Grant, Asian American Studies Program, Indiana University
2021	Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship, Honorable Mention
2021	Midwest Sociological Society Student Participation Grant
2020-21	Lindesmith Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Indiana University
2020	Asian American Studies Creativity Showcase Winner, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University
2018-20	Graduate Fellowship, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University
2019	Midwest Sociological Society Travel Grant

2018	Anna L. Homquest Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Indiana University
2014-16	Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship Grant
2013-14	PinS (Partners in Scholarship) Grant, University of Denver
2014	Wilbert E. Moore Award for Outstanding Scholarship, Department of Sociology, University of Denver
2010-14	Provost Scholar, University of Denver

Research Experience

Graduate Research Assistant, Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, Indiana University, January 2019-2023, 2024-2025

- Managed communications through weekly email newsletters and social media accounts
- Developed and maintained Center website, including creation of public-facing resources
- Planned, promoted, and facilitated Center events
- Trained and supervised undergraduate interns

Research Assistant, Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Indiana University Indianapolis, PI: Una Osili, February 2021-June 2022

- Projects: 1) Everyday Donors of Color, 2) Declining Donors, 3) Understanding Latinx Philanthropy
- Developed codes and themes for data analysis
- Produced focus group analytic memos for use across research teams
- Collaborated on write-up and editing of final research briefs and reports

Research Assistant, Social Networks and Parenting Study, Indiana University, PI: Jessica Calarco, May-August 2019, January-December 2021

- Contributed to research project design, interview guide development and editing
- Recruited participants and trained junior project members
- Conducted interviews in-person and via Zoom for two study waves
- Engaged in preliminary data analysis, field notes, and analytic memos

Research Assistant, Perceptions of High School Bullying in US and South Korea, Indiana University, PI: John Kennedy, June 2019-January 2020

- Developed and distributed a multinational survey distributed through a Qualtrics survey in the U.S. and the Korea Academic Multimode Open Survey (KAMOS) in South Korea
- Preliminary results and methodology were presented at the Asian Network for Public Opinion Research (ANPOR) Annual Conference in the session: "Multinational Survey Research and Survey Experiments: A Small Step," Chiang Mai, Thailand, Nov. 2019

Research Assistant, Art Collectors as Reflections of the Fine Arts Field, Indiana University, PI: Fabio Rojas, September 2018 - April 2019

- Conducted preliminary analysis of interviews with art collectors
- Developed focused codes and thematic summaries

Teaching Experience

Instructor of record, Indiana University, 2020-2023

Responsible for developing curriculum, lecture material, managing learning management system (Canvas), office hours, and grading to in-person and online classes of 45-55 students

- Race and Ethnic Relations (S335) *(two semesters)*
- Social Problems and Policies: Racism as a Social Problem (S101)

Teaching Assistant, Indiana University, Sociology Department, 2018-2020

Responsible for grading, facilitating class-wide and small group discussions, and individual instruction as needed to in-person classes of 70-80 students

- Criminology (S325)
- Race and Ethnic Relations (S335) *(two semesters)*
- Social Problems and Policies: Medicine in America (S101)

Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship, Fulbright Korean-American Educational Commission, South Korea, 2014-2016

- Taught English to over 1,800 high school students in classes of 25 to 42 students
- Developed original lesson plans and textbook-based lessons
- Planned and taught after-school classes for advanced students, English club activities & weekly adult English classes for teachers

Conference Presentations

2025 "Mom You Can't Sing the N-Word: Bidirectional Ethnic-Racial Socialization in Multiracial Families," North Central Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Lexington, KY.

2025 "I love him but sometimes he doesn't understand race: The Hidden Labor of Children in Multiracial Families," Asian American Research Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2024 "White Wage, White Tax: Multiracial Young Adults' Identification and Experiences with Whiteness," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Montréal, Canada.

2024 "An Arts-Based Analysis of Whiteness within Multiracial Identity," Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference, Columbus, OH.

2024 "Wages of Whiteness? Multiracial Young Adults' Experiences of Whiteness as a Contingent Status, Wage, and Tax," North Central Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Columbus, OH.

2023 "Becoming White? The Role of Whiteness in Multiracial Identity," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.

2022 "Exploring the Possibilities of Arts-Based Research," North Central Sociological Association Annual Meeting. Indianapolis, IN.

2021 "Racial Reminders and References: How Multiracial Individuals Construct Racial Identity through Interactions," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting (virtual).

2021 "Intentional Inconsistencies: How Multiracial Individuals Craft 'Racial Elevator Speeches' to Mitigate Racial Microaggressions," Midwest Sociological Society Annual Meeting (virtual).

2020 "How Multiracial Individuals Use 'Racial Elevator Speeches' to Field Inquiries about Race," American Sociological Association. (*Session cancelled due to COVID-19*)

2019 "Reminders and References: How Others' Racial Appraisals Shape Multiracial Identities," Researching the Margins Qualitative Research Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2019 "Linguistic Shortcuts and Self-Preservation: How Multiracial Individuals Use 'Racial Elevator Speeches' to Field Inquiries about Race," Researching the Margins Qualitative Research Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2019 "What Are You? Lived vs. Learned Multiracial Identities," CRRES Graduate Student Research Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2019 "The Relationship between Racial Ancestry and Multiracial Identity" (with Ben Hartmann), Midwest Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

2019 "What Are You? Lived vs. Learned Racial Identity among Multiracial Asians," Asian American Research Symposium, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

Invited Presentations & Guest Lectures

2024 "The Racial Elevator Speech" in Asian American Experience, Department of American Studies, University of Notre Dame.

2023 "Panel in Arts, Activism, and Research" (with Vivek Vellanki, Shazia Akhtar, and Pei-Jung Li), Asian Culture Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2023 "The Racial Elevator Speech" in Qualitative Research Methods, Pitzer College.

2022 "Asian American Identity, Activism, and Civic Engagement" workshop at Asian Culture Center "Retracing Our Roots" Annual Retreat, Martinsville, IN.

2022 "Visual Methodologies and Arts-Based Research" (with Javier Cardona Otero and Darshana Devarajan), School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2022 "Let's talk about mentoring: roundtable with graduate students and recent graduates" (with Jennifer Park and Lekeah Durden), Graduate Mentoring Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2020 "Race, Representation, and Art" (with Terri Francis and Vivek Vellanki), Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity Coffee Hour, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2020 "An Open Letter to Faculty Teaching Graduate Courses," Asian American Studies and the College Office for Diversity and Inclusion Community Conversation Hour: COVID-19 and Asian American Racism, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2020 "Academic Personal Websites and Web Presence for Sociologists" Workshop (with Jessica Calarco and Rashawn Ray), Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

2019 "Visual Voices: Using Art Activism for Self-Care and Social Change," Workshop at the Indiana Asian American Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

Service

2018-current Asian American Studies Graduate Advisory Board, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University

2018-current Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society Research Symposium Planning Committee, Indiana University

2020-2022 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, Department of Sociology, Indiana University

2019-2020 Preparing Future Faculty Conference Planning Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, Indiana University

2019-2020 Interpreting Inequality Conference Planning Committee, Department of Sociology and Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, Indiana University

2018-2019 Race Workshop Organizer, Department of Sociology, Indiana University

Manuscript Reviewer

Social Forces, Social Problems, Visual Studies, Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

Professional Affiliations

Alpha Kappa Delta
Alpha Lambda Delta
American Sociological Association
- Section on Asia and Asian America
- Section on Culture
- Section on Education
- Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities
- Section on Social Psychology

Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society, Indiana University
Critical Mixed Race Studies Association
Hoosier Asian American Power
Phi Beta Kappa (inducted as junior)

National Mortar Board, Kedros Chapter
National Society of Collegiate Scholars
North Central Sociological Association