ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: MAKING RACIAL MEANING IN AN ERA OF COLOR-BLIND RACISM

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ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: MAKING RACIAL MEANING IN AN ERA OF COLOR-BLIND RACISM

A Dissertation in Education with a Concentration in Curriculum Studies

by

Vijay Pendakur

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

November 2013
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Abstract

Since the end of the Civil Rights era, a new paradigm has emerged for understanding race and racism in American society. This neoliberal hegemonic discourse argues that systemic racism ended with the abolishment of formal, juridical racism and that any continued investment in race is both unnecessary and deeply problematic. Critical race theorists have named this framework color-blind racism. In recent years, color-blind racist discourse has been repackaged under a "post-race" label and the election of America’s first non-White president has only served to bolster notions that America might have somehow transcended race.

For college students, the undergraduate years are often a time of great intellectual, emotional, and spiritual upheaval and this instability makes college a prime site for examining individuals’ meaning-making and identity formation processes. Students of color are no exception to this overall phenomenon and the literature on racial identity development speaks to the dramatic changes in self-concept that individuals of color often experience while attending college. One group of students of color, Asian American college students, are deeply understudied and there is little scholarly writing on Asian American college students’ racial identity development process.

This dissertation is a qualitative study of the effects of color-blind racism on the racial identity meaning-making of Asian American college freshmen. Using a narrative inquiry methodology, the author conducted lengthy in-person interviews with nine participants. The emergent themes from the study indicate that the participants’ racial meaning-making process was heavily laden with elements of the ethnicity paradigm of race, color-blind racist tropes, and Asian American racial tropes. The study results suggest that these participants’ hold little in the
way of racial identity consciousness, as Asian Americans, and that their heavy investment in ethnic identity works to support a color-blind racial frame. Furthermore, elements of color-blind racism and Asian American racial formation appear to interlock in unique ways to produce complicity with the logic of color-blind racism and support for key elements of White racial hegemony. Further research is needed on the effects of color-blind racism on the identity development of college students broadly, and on Asian American students specifically.
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my partner, Katie. For the back rubs during times of misery. For the laughter during times of frustration. For the curiosity during times of excitement. And for the hugs throughout. Thank you for being such a wonderful companion…our journey is just beginning!
A memory lingers like oil on the surface of my mind. As an undergraduate student, I studied Japanese at a large public institution in the Upper Midwest. At the end of my freshmen year, I was cramming for finals with a group of other Japanese majors and my study buddy, Susan, said to me, “You know, I’m going to be transferring and not returning here in the fall. I wanted to let you know that you speak so well.” I was flattered and a little shocked that Susan wasn’t going to return to campus in the fall so I stammered back, “Uh, thanks. I actually didn’t think my Japanese was that great.” She replied, “No, I was talking about your English.” I smiled weakly, fumbled with my pen, and said nothing back.

Shocked. That’s all I can remember feeling on the walk back to my residence hall from the library. Slowly, the numbing silence of shock receded, uncovering anger and hurt. I recall getting off the elevator on my residence hall floor and heading straight over to my friend Bill’s room. Bill, a White guy from a northern suburb of Chicago, had been my friend for most of my freshmen year. I told Bill the story, exclaiming, “I can’t believe she thinks that I’m not American! I mean, listen to the way I speak!” Bill was angry for me. He shook his head and said, “Hey bro, I just want to let you know, I totally think of you as White.” He put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a comforting squeeze.

Being Asian American has never been simple. In the years that followed my initial experiences at college, I proceeded to take courses in Asian American Studies, American history, and East Asian studies. I also went on to have many more personal experiences with racism and White privilege. Feelings of anger and hurt, shock and shame, were fed and shaped in the crucible of collegiate life, but I emerged from the academy with a growing vocabulary to name
my experience of race. While in college, calling myself Asian American gave me strength and pride to endure and challenge pervasive racism. Being Asian American connected me to a legacy of anti-racist, anti-colonial resistance that is an integral part of the American story. Searching for other Asian Americans led me into the campus multicultural center, where I made close friends, became an engaged student, and learned to channel my incendiary rage into a sustained conviction that race matters and that racial justice work was my life’s work.

Today, I continue to work in a collegiate setting, as a student affairs practitioner. I work in multicultural student affairs and have accompanied students on their journey towards adulthood and greater self-understanding for more than a decade. Alas, being Asian American only seems to have become more complex. Race, in the post-Civil Rights Era, is under attack as a concept in itself. The rise of color-blind politics, the emergence of America’s first Black president, and the deeper entrenchment of neoliberalism in our society have led our country to ask, “Do we live in a post-racial society?” The tremors of this discourse are felt everywhere, including on college campuses. Today, young Asian Americans have to contend simultaneously with anti-Asian racism (Chou & Feagin, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) and the contradiction that, perhaps, race doesn’t matter anymore.

Color-blindness, as a neoliberal strategy for negotiating racial difference, presents major challenges for any movement for racial justice. By positioning racism as irrational and ahistorical (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wise, 2010), color-blindness obscures the pervasive and systemic nature of racism and White supremacy. Beyond negating the continued salience of race in American society, color-blindness also strengthens hegemonic systems of racial inequity by preventing race-based solutions to social issues that are steeped in racial realities (Aleinikoff, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Crenshaw, 1988; Forman, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Smith, 2008).
Extensive research in the field of psychology demonstrates that, for individuals in our society, color-blindness actually engenders its own form of racism (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). In aggregate, this set of structural, discursive, and psychological contexts give birth to the idea of color-blind racism, one of the key contexts for this dissertation study.

I am deeply interested in the relationship between color-blind racism and Asian American racial identity formation. Having been an Asian American college student once myself, and working with Asian American college students for much of my professional career, I see the undergraduate years as a productive arena to study the interplay between hegemonic discourses and individual development. There is also ample scholarship demonstrating that college students are involved, consciously and unconsciously, in a process of identity development (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1975; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) and that racial identity is an important part of this overall life stage (Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Tanaka, 2002).

One particularly relevant and useful framework for understanding the complexity of this process is Renn’s (2003) ecological framework for conceptualizing racial identity development in college students. Renn adapts the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) to theorize, “…the development of individual students within a complex, dynamic, interactive web of environments, some of which do not even contain them…” (p. 386). These nested, or overlapping, contexts help us connect the multiple environments that contribute to students’ identity development. Renn uses Bronfenbrenner’s nomenclature of Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems, and Macrosystems to label each increasingly distal context, placing the individual student in the center of the framework (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Applying the Ecology Model to a Campus Environment. Adapted from “Understanding the identities of mixed-race college students through a developmental ecology lens,” by K. A. Renn, 2003, *Journal of College Student Development* 44(3), p. 388.

Renn’s work is particularly useful to this study because it offers a conceptual bridge to student affairs practitioners, the target audience for this study, between student development theory and the critical scholarship on race and color-blind racism. This extant discursive gap leaves student affairs practitioners often unaware of the impact of color-blind racism on college students’ identity development. Using Renn’s model, color-blind racism can be understood as a
macrosystem context in which students are embedded. Renn’s model might offer particular utility to student affairs practitioners attempting to understand critical race theory for the first time, as it offers a way to understand the student experience as embedded in multiple, constitutive, power-laced discourses. By situating the student in this type of relationship with color-blind racism, questions arise as to the generative nature of context and process. How do Asian American college students make meaning of their racial identity in an era of color-blind racism?

**Theoretical Frameworks: Racial Formation Theory and Critical Race Theory**

There are numerous theoretical frameworks for understanding race and conducting research on race. Critical Race Theory, broadly, and Racial Formation Theory, more specifically, serve as key theoretical frameworks for this study. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars concerned with race and racism in the United States began to articulate a set of arguments that claimed that race, as opposed to gender and class, had been under-theorized in the American academy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Two bodies of theory that emerged to meet this need were Omi and Winant’s (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* and a set of scholarship called Critical Race Theory (CRT). First published in 1986, Omi and Winant’s work offers critical scholars a robust theorization of race and racism in the context of American capitalist hegemony, a form of dominance and subordination based on consent. CRT, and particularly the work on CRT in the field of education, provides a set of challenging conceptual guidelines and counter-hegemonic ethical convictions through which to systematically analyze the experience of people of color in American education.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that, “Race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interest by referring to different types of human bodies” (p. 55). This
definition of race is particularly potent because it balances the ideological nature of race as a social-construct with the material reality that race is ascribed onto human bodies. Omi and Winant (1994) challenge us to think of race as neither an essential category nor a total illusion. Using this notion of race, the authors go on to state that racial formation is the, “…sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55).

Key elements in this notion of racial formation are that race is a process and one that is inextricably embedded in social and historical realities.

Omi and Winant (1994) write that their theory of racial formation consists of two key components. First, they argue that racial formation happens in a series of racial projects, which they define as “historical projects” in which both the ideological and structural components are organized and assigned to certain human bodies. They note, however, that racial projects are intimately connected to, “[efforts to] …reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (1994, p. 56). This linkage between race and resources is a doorway to understanding the second part of their theory of racial formation, which claims that the process of racial formation, and its attendant racial projects, is tied to the maintenance of hegemony. Omi and Winant (1994) offer critical theorists a way to think of race not only in historical, material, and ideological terms, but they also position race in the scholarship on hegemony. Racial formation challenges us to think about how race has been constructed to support the maintenance of hierarchical power relations and the elite in American society.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the second major theoretical influence on how I conceptualize race in this study. Historically, CRT emerged from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a branch of legal scholarship that developed along with the Civil Rights Movement to critique the legal system for its role in maintaining oppression (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004).
CLS placed a heavy emphasis on examining the law as a representation of the liberal state, but many non-White scholars began to find CLS lacking in its account of race (Bell, 1980; Delgado, 1987). These scholars began to write about the law, while using a framework that centralized race and racism in problematizing the traditional legal system. While often misunderstood as being oppositional to CLS, these critical race theorists sought to extend the analysis of CLS in the post-Civil Rights era (Tate, 1997). As a result of this historical context, the initial body of CRT scholarship is heavily focused on issues of race and racism in legal analysis. By the mid-1990s, another set of scholars concerned with race and racism in the field of education decided to formally articulate the utility of CRT for educational scholarship. These bridge-builders and border-crossers developed a set of central tenets, which I subsequently review, that make CRT valuable for theorizing race and racism within US education, both historically and in the present (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997).

Tate (1997) writes that racism is endemic in American society and, for CRT in the field of education, this fact calls for a focus on how racism legally, culturally, and psychologically limits opportunities for students of color. CRT also challenges scholars of education to be pragmatically transdisciplinary in their approach to emancipatory scholarship. Rather than adhering to one stance, CRT calls for scholars to use the best theoretical tools to accomplish their task and this lends itself to broad interdisciplinary practice. CRT strongly problematizes a civil rights-based legal approach to addressing inequity, due to the conviction that these reforms end up being undermined before they can become effective. In the field of education, this gives potent challenge to the liberal multiculturalism movement, as this liberal framework is closely tied to the Civil Rights Movement and the demand for incremental, legal reform. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) articulate this liberal multiculturalist paradox as, “…the difficulty of
maintaining the spirit and intent of justice for the oppressed while simultaneously permitting the hegemonic rule of the oppressor” (p. 62). This is an important contribution from CRT to the field of education, as liberal multiculturalism remains the dominant paradigm in the field\(^1\) for understanding race, power, and oppression.

Tate (1997) also sharply questions epistemic claims of “neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy,” (p. 235) and calls for educators to problematize research that adhere to these flawed constructs, as they serve as veils for dominant interests. In parallel with rejecting classic academic notions of objectivity and neutrality, CRT also centralizes the stories, and the act of storytelling, in unearthing the lived experience of people of color. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain that, “For the critical race theorist, social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories…. Not only are stories themselves important but the act of story-telling can serve as “…medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (1995, p. 57).

Finally, CRT asserts that history and context are crucial to addressing the experience of people of color. In educational praxis and educational research, this final challenge is a reminder to us that we must not ignore the crucial role of history in shaping our understanding and experience of race, as well as the integral nature of class, gender, and other social identities, as contextual to our experience in US education.

Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation and the scholarship on CRT in education serve as a theoretical foundation for this review. Omi and Winant (1994) offer a comprehensive

\(^{1}\) It is important to note that there are multiple multiculturalist paradigms. CRT challenges the liberal multiculturalist paradigm by offering a critical multiculturalist paradigm (Goldberg, 1994), sometimes called a multicultural social justice education paradigm (Sleeter & Grant, 2007), that centralizes the role of power and structure in producing inequality while also emphasizing democratic agency and critical praxis as forms of liberatory resistance.
theorization of race that is embedded in U.S. history as well as an understanding of US capitalist hegemony. This perspective is crucial to my examination of Asian American racial identity, as I argue that Asian American identity has been constructed, as a racial project, and reconstructed, in response to socio-political agendas, over time. I also link Asian American racial formation to the needs of the U.S. state as a capitalist and imperialist hegemonic system.

CRT, particularly the scholarship that bridges this framework into education, helps me shape my examination of the Asian American student experience in higher education. My emphasis on history and context comes directly from CRT and I strongly believe that one cannot understand Asian American identity without these pieces. CRT in education offers a strong challenge to multiculturalism and my conviction is that the liberal multiculturalist paradigm cannot sufficiently explain the oppression faced by Asian American students in higher education, nor does it offer us tools to address the existing inequity. CRT centralizes stories and storytelling as a way to bring the experience of people of color into account and I plan to make use of “story” in my dissertation study by conducting a narrative inquiry process that centralizes Asian American college student life-stories as the space where racial meaning is made.

**Statement of the Problem**

…the student development literature reveals little examination regarding the complexities of using multiple theoretical perspectives such as constructivism, critical theory, or queer theory… (Abes, 2009, p. 143)

Color-blind racism merits a depth of scholarly attention in select fields of academic research, such as sociology, Critical Race Theory, and social psychology. It has not, however, received much attention in the discipline of college student development theory (Abes, 2009;
Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Tanaka, 2002). For higher education student affairs administrators, college student development theory is one of the key lenses through which college students are theorized, studied, and engaged. Student affairs practitioners take at least one college student development course in masters programs that are now considered required preparation for the field. Within the broader writing on college student development, the literature on racial identity development is crucial to how student affairs practitioners understand and work with college students of color, including Asian American students.

Recently, scholars of student development theory, such as Abes (2009), have called attention to the gap between the large volume of critical social theory and the rapidly developing literature on college students. A poignant example of this disconnect can be found in the recent publication of a second edition of Wijeyesinghe and Jackson’s (2012) *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development: Integrating Emerging Frameworks*. This major update to the highly influential 2001 edition only engages color-blindness twice in the entire book, in sections dealing with White college students’ racial identity development. Furthermore, the text narrowly mentions color-blind ideologies, rather than engaging color-blind racism as a hegemonic system. In summary, as a result of this powerful disconnect, college student development theory has yet to incorporate the implications of color-blind racism into its core assumptions and conclusions in any meaningful way.

It is my contention that this lacuna, between the broader critical scholarship on color-blind racism and student development theory, places racialized college students at particular risk of being mis-served or under-served during their university experience. If student affairs practitioners are not aware of the current terrain of race and racism in America, they cannot
effectively mentor and support young adults during a crucially formative period in their identity development. At the extreme, administrators who unwittingly internalize the hegemonic logic of color-blind racism may actually collude with this inequitable system, thereby promoting a post-racial platform that deifies individualism, vilifies collective racial identity, and leaves students of color particularly vulnerable to the effects of racism de facto.

Scope and Significance

Within the broader terrain of racism and collegiate risk covered in this introduction, Asian American students face unique, intersectional challenges. Asian American racial identity, when examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory, offers strong evidence for the existence of White racial hegemony through the use of socio-historical racial projects. Asian Americans are simultaneously constructed and positioned as honorary Whites by Model Minority typology and un-assimilable others by the socio-historical legacy of being Perpetually Foreign (Alvarez, 2002; Junn, 2007; Kim, 1999). In the last fifty years, Asian American racial identity has been deployed as a hegemonic wedge to bolster Whiteness while further marginalizing Blacks and Latinos as non-Model Minorities (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). This liminal positioning not only strengthens the racial state but also serves to deeply marginalize Asian Americans by denying them both racial equality, as well as racial salience. Research on Asian American college students can help us understand the interplay between color-blind racism and Asian American racial identity. Furthermore, since Asian American college students are actually the fastest growing sector of the American college student population (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007) while also being severely understudied (Museus & Kiang, 2009), any research in this area can contribute to how student affairs practitioners work with, and advocate for, these college students.
Asian American racial formation, as well as color-blind racism, are key contexts for this study. It is my hope that my research can advance the ways that student affairs practitioners, as well as racial justice activists at large, understand Asian American racial identity and color-blind racism. By adding nuance to the way we theorize race and racial hegemony, I hope to dispel the seeming allure of post-raciality; the seductive notion that if we abandon race, perhaps we can also abandon racism. It is my intention that this research not only provide us with new frameworks of resistance to color-blind racism, but also new theoretical mechanisms for race-conscious coalition building and liberatory action.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are:

How do first-year Asian American students at an urban, private university in the Midwest make meaning of their racial identity in an era of color-blind racism?

- How do these students racially identify and understand that identity in their life stories?
- What do these students learn about race in their home communities and in their first year of college?
- What, if any, tenets of color-blind racism have they internalized and/or contested in their meaning-making process?

**A Note on Terminology**

The term Asian American is a political, coalitional term used to group a wide variety of ethnic groups that can trace their roots back to the Asian continent. Within the literature on Asian Americans, there is intense debate as to whether this *umbrella* term does justice to the
deep heterogeneity of the community. Alternative terms such as Asian Pacific Islander
American or Asian Pacific Islander Desi American are sometimes used to try and be more
inclusive of often overlooked, and uniquely situated, groups within the Asian American pan-
ethnic community. For the purpose of this dissertation study of race and racism, I will use the
term Asian American because of the socio-historical and political legacy of this language in the
American struggle for racial justice. I acknowledge that this choice comes with attendant
problems and limitations, as do all choices in the parlance of race and ethnicity.
CHAPTER 2 – A REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

My research study sits at the crossroads of several different bodies of scholarship. The central focus of this literature review is to better understand the literature on color-blind racism, as that is the main context for my dissertation study. I am, however, exploring this form of racism as it appears (or fails to appear) in the lived experiences of Asian American college students. Hence, the bodies of scholarship on Asian American racial identity theory, Asian American college student development theory, and college student development theory more broadly become important arenas of literature to include in this chapter. Each of these subjects, from color-blind racism to college student development theory, are too large to review exhaustively in the context of this chapter so my review will focus on the relevant works, as well as the more recent research, in an attempt to explore how the extant scholarship informs and challenges my own research agenda.

Color-Blind Racism and Post-Raciality

History and terminology. The history and literature on color-blind politics in America is both wide and deep. For the purposes of this review, I will briefly focus my attention on the specific manifestation of color-blind politics that emerged after the 1960s, in the Post-Civil Right Era. Scholars attempting to map the contours of modern racism have generated a multitude of explanations for the shift from the overt, juridical racism of the Jim Crow era to the covert, de facto racism that remained after the 1964 Civil Rights Act. For the majority of White Americans, however, the legal protections for race and ethnicity that civil rights activists won in the late 1950s and 1960s marked the end of racism as a salient issue in American society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Popularly, this shift gave rise to the notion that the public sphere was now
truly egalitarian and meritocratic, and that people of color no longer had any excuses for not succeeding. In this new era, race no longer had the meaning once conferred by overt, legalized racism, hence a corollary rhetoric of color-blindness emerged in the 1970s, supported by the logic that simply not seeing race will guarantee that race does not matter (Williams & Land, 2006; Wise, 2010). Ideologies that normalize this logic will be labeled in this review as color-blind attitudes, color-blind discourse, or color-blind politics, accordingly. Crucial to the focus of this review is an understanding that these ideologies buttress the current form of racial hegemony\(^2\), in that they support the extant, racist, White power structure (Aleinikoff, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Crenshaw, 1988; Forman, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Smith, 2008). Hence, I will use the language of color-blind racism throughout this review to indicate the hegemonic system that is bolstered by color-blind ideologies.

**Definitions and mechanics.** Color-blind attitudes and color-blind racism have been studied and defined differently by scholars across multiple disciplines. In my reading of these works, several definitions arose as being notable representations of the general concept under examination. An early definition of color-blind attitudes was simply the ideology that structural racism does not exist (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). The authors of this study chose to nuance their construction of color-blindness by adding their conviction that color-blindness, “…does not necessarily reflect a belief in racial superiority, just an unawareness of the existence of racism” (Neville et al., 2000, p. 61). Six years later, Neville, working with a

\(^2\) Omi and Winant (1994) draw from Gramsci to define hegemony as a system of control based on both coercion and consent. In a hegemonic system, the ruling elite incorporate key interests of subordinated groups to pacify resistance while also perpetuating a common sense ideology that leads subordinated group members to act in ways that enforce the rule of the elites. This complex interplay between incorporation, ideology, and resistance offers us a way to understand American racial rule, particularly in its shift from overt dominance to covert coercion and consent in the post-Civil Rights era.
different group of scholars, published another journal article that offered a more critical construction of color-blind attitudes. This later definition casts color-blind attitudes as a justification of the racial status quo, the minimization of racial inequalities, a barrier to integration, and notions of racial inequality being linked to sub-group culture (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006). This shift in how Neville and her colleagues defined color-blind racism is indicative of the wealth of research released in the early and mid-2000s that expanded and evolved the critical understanding of this political framework. Neville, Spanierman, and Doan’s (2006) findings are also integral for this review, for they explicitly connect individual attitudes of colorblindness to attitudes and beliefs connected to well-established definitions of modern racism.

In his seminal work, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Bonilla-Silva (2006) dramatically extends the scholarship on color-blind racism by breaking the central concept into four dominant frames. Bonilla-Silva agrees with the broader consensus that color-blind racism is the racial discourse that supports the nuanced, covert institutional racism of the Post-Civil Rights Era. The author, however, explains that racial ideology always has dominant frames through which information is disseminated, ingested, filtered, and perpetuated. Bonilla-Silva divines his four frames from wide-scale interviews conducted with college students from several different types of institutions and non-college students from the Detroit-area.

*Abstract liberalism*, Bonilla-Silva’s first frame, combines key concepts from political liberalism, like meritocracy, with the tenets of economic liberalism, such as individual choice, to explain racial realities. *Naturalization*, frame number two, suggests that racial realities are the result of some sort of natural order – such as explaining urban racial segregation through the
logic of, “people like to live near others like themselves” (2006, p. 28). Cultural racism, the author’s third frame, asserts that the inequity found in communities of color is the result of cultural tendencies that negatively impact those communities. For example, the cultural racism frame is present when people conclude that Black people are often poor because they are (or Black culture is) prone to apathy and/or victimhood. Finally, minimization of racism, is a frame that asserts that racism is no longer an issue after the legal reforms of the Civil Rights Movement. These four frames are an important contribution to the definition of color-blind racism, as they add structure to the pathways through which a racist ideology exerts its influence in pervasive and perpetuative ways in our society.

Departing from sociological analysis, Guinier and Torres (2003) historicize the color-blind racist framework and unpack its workings through Critical Legal Theory (CLS) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) lenses. They explain that, before the civil rights acts of the 1960s, race operated in American society as a fixed category (2003). Operating as a simple, legal, biological category, race was used to demarcate and exclude non-Whites from crucial aspects of public and private life. The legal response to this fixed construction of race was also simplistic, in that constitutional lawyers argued that as long as the law applied racial measures evenly to all races, equal protection jurisprudence was being fairly met. Under this logic, as long as Whites were as equally segregated as Blacks, the metric of equality, as stressed by the equal protection clause in the 14th amendment, was being duly applied to all groups. This framework gave birth to the “separate but equal” defense of Jim Crow laws. Civil rights agitation challenged not only the false equality offered under Jim Crow, but also the fixed conception of race-as-biological. After several decades of struggle, civil rights reform resulted in the collapse of much of the formal, state-sponsored discrimination tied to fixed, biological notions of race. Guinier and
Torres (2003) explain that the color-blind racist framework that emerges after the passing of the Civil Rights Acts in 1964 and 1968, which banned overt discrimination based on race, religion, and national origin, generates the narrative that, “…After formal, state-sanctioned barriers to individual mobility are removed, any continuing inequality must result from the personal failure of individuals…” (p. 35). Through their use of CLS and CRT lenses, Guinier and Torres (2003) are able to clearly explain how color-blind racism also works to problematize individuals of color while freeing the state from owning the burden of historical, as well as current, systemic racism.

Much like Neville et al. (2000) and Bonilla-Silva (2006), Guinier and Torres (2003) attempt to distill the complexities of color-blind racism down to its essential components. They argue that color-blind racism endorses three axioms: that race is simply skin color; that the recognition of race is the invocation of fixed, biological notions of race; and that racism is now a personal problem. These three rules work in concert to simultaneously strip race of its historical and material context by reducing it to skin color while silencing any meaningful engagement with race by problematizing racial talk as contributing to racism. The third rule of color-blind racism, in this framework, de-systematizes common constructions of race and racism and frames them as irrational, personal issues. Guinier and Torres’ scholarship on color-blind racism, as well as the other scholarship reviewed in this section, provides us with a many-faceted definition for this construct as well as a basic schema for how it works.

It must be noted that post-racial discourses, much like color-blind discourses, operate on the central proposition that American society has solved its enduring racial problems and, therefore, racial saliency is no longer valid. Critical scholarship (Barnes, 2009; Marshall, 2009) on post-race politics takes note of the ways in which claims of post-raciality are used to
destabilize social justice movements that invoke racial identity in their quest for equity. While the language of post-race might not always appear alongside the terminology of color-blind racism, critical theorists, such as Barnes and Marshall, have been quick to point out that the post-race frame is simply a new construction of color-blind racism. Post-race discourses work to bolster the key tenets of color-blind racism through the selective use of token characters such as Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama. Due to the post-racial framework being a hegemonic facelift for color-blind racism, I will use the latter term throughout this review to reference both frameworks of oppression.

In this review, I draw heavily from the disciplines of sociology, education, psychology, and legal studies to assess the topography of criticism on color-blind racism. Rather than organize my observations disciplinarily, I found these critiques more easily divided into what I am terming theoretical criticism and applied criticism. Theoretical critiques focus on the epistemic, discursive, ontological, and political ramifications of color-blind racism, while applied critiques locate their concern in the affective, developmental, and policy implications of this paradigm. I balance my attempt at organization with the caveat that, as with all academic demarcations, a multitude of overlaps and intersections muddy any attempt at neat categorization.

**Theoretical criticism.** Several scholars have documented the linkage between color-blind racism and notions of American meritocracy (Barnes, 2009; Williams & Land, 2006). Color-blind racism demands that individuals not take race into account, when dealing with other people or thinking about society at large. An integral mechanism in this obscuring of the centrality of race is the belief that, after the passing of major Civil Rights legislation, American society became truly meritocratic. Under this belief, with the removal of juridical segregation,
one’s success is solely dependent upon one’s ingenuity and hard work and race can no longer be an explanation for unequal development or performance.

This firm adherence to believing that American society is meritocratic works in conjunction with color-blind racism to enhance White privilege and deepen racial inequity. Critical scholarship (Forman, 2004; Marshall, 2009) calls attention to this perpetuative cycle by noting that racism has continued to structure our society since the 1960s, resulting in further unequal development between Whites and people of color. Whites, using the framework of color-blind racism, examine this inequality in the form of high school dropout rates, incarceration rates, or countless other examples, and conclude that differential achievement can only be accorded to individual agency. Since, in the color-blind frame, America is purely meritocratic, the sole blame for issues such as poverty, homelessness, or gang violence rests on communities of color (Forman, 2004; Marshall, 2009). The collusion between the hegemonic myth of American meritocracy and color-blind racism re-centers the “culture of poverty” arguments that dominated social science thinking on inequity during the 1970s. By failing to take structural racism into account when examining societal issues, Marshall argues, color-blind racism deftly shifts the etiology of racialized inequity into the realm of “cultural problems” within communities of color (Marshall, 2009, p. 192).

Gallagher (2003) extends this analysis of meritocracy and color-blindness by conducting 17 focus groups to study urban and rural White attitudes about racial relations. In light of Gallagher’s findings being more theoretical and discursive in nature, I have included his study in this section of this review. The author notes that these two frames work in concert to produce the illusion for Whites that their success, in relation to people of color, is solely the result of their hard-work, thrift, and ingenuity. He also concludes that by obscuring the effects of White
privilege, color-blindness allows Whites to oppose race-conscious measures of addressing inequity, such as affirmative action, while simultaneously divorcing themselves from any sense of ownership in current racialized inequity. Finally, Gallagher observes that color-blindness allows the Whites in his study to diminish the importance of historical, overt manifestations of White privilege through claims that discrimination has ended. The belief that the playing field is now even allows Whites to minimize the critical role of history in shaping current inequities. In Gallagher’s analysis, meritocracy and color-blindness merge to buttress systemic White privilege while blinding Whites to this reality.

I found it interesting to note that Forman (2004) also offers this same critique of color-blindness and meritocracy furthering “the racial status quo” but he then proceeds to offer a different conclusion than Gallagher (Forman, 2004). Forman argues that color-blind racism might perpetuate White privilege, but that it lacks the same capability or tendency towards direct-harm that, earlier, Jim Crow racism held for people of color. He contends that the most important impact of color-blind racism is that it creates an environment in which most Whites and even some people of color are not moved to take action and address “persistent and pervasive” racial inequity (p. 46). Here, Forman is invoking the idea that color-blind racism obscures structural racism and makes race-conscious action and policy difficult to implement. I will explore this idea in further detail subsequently but, for now, I would like to regard Forman’s notion of direct-harm vs. indirect-harm with healthy skepticism. After the Applied Criticism section of this review, I will re-examine Forman’s conclusions in light of the aggregate scholarship on this subject.

While Forman (2004) lightly touches on the idea that color-blindness creates barriers to efforts that directly address racism and racial inequity, several other scholars engage this
criticism in great detail. The core thrust of this research is that color-blind racism, whether employed consciously or unconsciously, creates an analysis of social problems in which race cannot be a factor. Critical scholars note that race and racism are at the heart of many social issues and cannot be ameliorated by race-blind approaches (Castro Atwater, 2008; Wise, 2010). Race-neutral, or color-blind, approaches fail to treat the disease because they fail to recognize the true cause of the problem.

Esposito and Finley (2009) offer examples of this dynamic through examining President Obama’s logic on April 29th, 2009, at his 100-day address. In the question and answer period following his prepared remarks, Obama was questioned by a Black Entertainment Television reporter on which specific policies he planned to implement to help the Black community. In his answer, the President acknowledged that “Black and Latino communities are particularly vulnerable to unemployment” and other challenges during the recession. He then went on to list a set of color-blind policies like the Recovery Act and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, both of which are safety nets for the general public, but do not address the systemic racism that places communities of color at risk in the job sector or health care sector. Esposito and Finley (2009) argue that this is an emblematic example of a larger problem with the Obama administration. For this review essay, the contradiction between the racialized realities that Obama acknowledges and the color-blind policies of his administration is a strong example of the connection between color-blind politics, color-blind racism, and the resultant barriers for effective action to address racial inequities.

Other scholars extend this analysis into the realm of law and educational policy, noting that these structures are Eurocentric and White normative (Anderson, 2007; Williams & Land, 2006). In the frame of color-blind politics, however, laws and policies that actually create and
maintain uneven development for people of color are viewed as being race-neutral. In this environment, where the laws and policies of society are race-conscious, but the hegemonic narrative is color-blind, individual and group actors who attempt to invoke race-conscious measures to alleviate oppression are seen as problematic, which strengthens the system of color-blind racism.

Another area of theoretical critique worth noting is the interplay between color-blind racism and American notions of individualism. Scholars Reason and Evans (2007) describe a “hegemony of individuality” that allows Whites to view racism as an irrational, personal problem, rather than a rational, organized system of power. This individuation of racial identity and racial problems is seen as a comfortable fit for the American psyche due to our national value of individual identity over collective identity (Castro Atwater, 2008). As noted previously, meritocratic mythologies allow Whites to locate the cause of racialized problems within communities of color. Critical scholarship on the role of individualism deepens this analysis to note that any glaring examples of racism within the supposed meritocratic system are quickly construed as the fault of bad individuals and not reflective of any systemic trends (Esposito & Finley, 2009). This dynamic also has a perpetuative effect within color-blind racism, in that each time structural racism is obfuscated by the hegemonic individualist lens, illusions of American meritocracy are strengthened while individuals of color are further problematized and victimized.

This hegemony of individuality has alternate effects on the politics of racial formation when examined under the superstructure of market capitalism. Liberal capitalism positions the individual as sacred in a market system due to the core assumption that each person is a rational actor making independent choices that, when aggregated, drive market forces. This notion of the individual centers the role of personal choice within the free market and color-blind racism
positions racial identity as an independent choice in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Critical scholarship (Gallagher, 2003) claims that, within color-blind racial framing, racial salience is no longer dictated by an oppressive system, so anyone who identifies with her or his race is choosing this identity. This allows Whites to make the subtle argument that people of color would stop experiencing inter-personal and intrapersonal racial discomfort if they would stop identifying as having a race.

Furthermore, this interplay between capitalism and color-blind racism constructs racial identity like White ethnicity, an identity that can be comfortably engaged and disengaged at-will. Gallagher (2003) points out St. Patrick’s or Columbus Day parades as examples of how Whites can selectively turn on and off their ethnic identification as a matter of personal choice. Color-blind racism positions racial identity as an individual voluntary choice within market capitalism, thereby insinuating that race, “…no longer matters as an independent force which organizes social life, allocates resource or creates obstacles to upward mobility” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 9). In my review of theoretical critique, I found this to be one body of scholarship that could benefit from further research. The examination of color-blind racism within the political economy of market capitalism is briefly touched on in Gallagher’s work and not mentioned directly in any of the other works in this review.

A final body of theoretical critique of color-blind racism is located in the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in legal scholarship. CRT emerged from Critical Legal Studies (CLS) through an intentional effort by key legal scholars to call attention to the alarming lack of racial analysis in the canon of CLS. CRT, as an epistemological framework has continued to grow in popularity, eventually gaining prominence in educational theory, but its roots are in legal critique (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Within legal studies, CRT engages a critique of color-blind
racism in its examination of the phenomenon of color-blind constitutionalism. For the purposes of this review, it will be important to first unpack the history and significance of color-blind constitutionalism before summarizing the CRT critique of this jurisprudence.

Gotanda (1991) defines color-blind constitutionalism as a means and an end. By not acknowledging race, or by being color-blind, the constitution is a means through which to educate Americans to not give value to race. Secondly, this framing of the constitution supports the post-1967 neoliberal ends of promoting racial assimilation to the point of racial irrelevance. Gotanda historicizes the constitution’s complex relationship with race by explaining that, at varying moments in U.S. history, the American constitution has constructed race in fundamentally different ways. For example, during the antebellum era, the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Dred Scott* case constructed a fixed, status-based understanding of race. Blacks, in this case, were officially inferior to Whites and, therefore, could be held as property. In contrast, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* constructed race as merely a formality, with no historical or material antecedents. Therefore, a *separate but equal* ruling was seen as just. According to the Court’s majority opinion, race had no inherent value so separate schooling would not lead to any inferiority amongst non-White schoolchildren (Gotanda, pp. 37-38).

This radical swing from status-based, biological, constructions of race to race-as-mere-formality continued to evolve during the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board*. The *Brown* Court’s decision to finally acknowledge the weight of history, stigmatization, and systematic inequality led them to overturn the *Plessy* decision and support the civil rights logic that separate *cannot be equal*. While this is often seen as an immense step forward in the struggle for racial justice, the *Brown* Court’s decision has had lasting, complex impact on the politics of racial justice (Smith, 2008). According to CRT scholarship, the temporal victory
found in the Brown ruling also served as the genesis for the era of color-blind constitutionalism in which any acknowledgement of race is seen as an investment in race. Particularly after 1968, color-blind constitutionalism often stigmatized race conscious measures as a step backwards, a movement away from the Court’s stance that race shouldn’t matter. For example, quotas, in the 1978 Bakke case, as well as university undergraduate admissions points in the 2003 Graatz case, were ruled against by the Supreme Court’s logic that these affirmative action mechanisms were unfair and that they reified stigmatizing, problematic notions of race (Smith, 2008; Cummings, 2010). CRT analysis asserts that the Court’s decisions to dismantle affirmative action programs are a key result of color-blind constitutionalism (Aleinikoff, 1991; Cummings, 2010; Smith, 2008).

Ultimately, CRT scholarship on color-blind constitutionalism charges that color-blindness upholds and reinforces White hegemony (Aleinikoff, 1991; Crenshaw, 1988; Gotanda, 1991; Smith, 2008). By divorcing our current understanding of race from historical, social, and material realities, color-blind constitutionalism furthers the neoliberal post-race agenda (Crenshaw, 1988). Furthermore, this construction of race positions racism as irrational instead of as a systemic strategy for maintaining a racial status quo (Gotanda, 1991). Gotanda (1991) argues that color-blind constitutionalism strips race of its historical and present social reality, which reduces racism to irrational, individual prejudice. This particular construction of racism, in turn, serves as a barrier to race conscious measures to address social inequity. Scholars Bell (1987) and Aleinikoff (1991) document the numerous ways that the Supreme Court has opposed race-based equity policies and programs by invoking color-blind logic that refuses to acknowledge the systemic nature of racism in structuring inequitable outcomes for non-Whites.
In summary, the criticism of color-blind constitutionalism in CRT legal scholarship is similar to, and supports the claims of, the previously reviewed theoretical research on color-blind racism. CRT legal scholarship, however, offers us a valuable linkage between color-blind racism and jurisprudence, which further reveals the extent of color-blind racism’s entrenchment as the dominant racial framework of our era.

**Applied criticism in education.** A broad range of scholars have studied the impact of color-blind racism in p-12 and higher education. The following section of this review will examine this criticism, with attention to the policy, affective, and developmental implications of this racist frame. In their study of the policy ramifications of color-blind racism on African American youth, authors Williams and Land (2006) argued that high-stakes testing in P-12 American education operates on White procedures and contexts which serve to marginalize students of color who cannot access these White cultural codes. In a color-blind racist educational ethos, however, high-stakes testing is positioned as value-neutral due to the de-centering of race and racism in this frame. In fact, the heavily racialized connection between White privilege and the cultural norms embedded in standardized tests are obscured by color-blind racism. This hegemonic frame positions testing as *color-blind*, and the numerous studies indicating that this testing schema disproportionally negatively impacts students of color do not serve to change the frame. Instead, students of color, particularly Black and Latino students, are problematized as a *failing group*.

At a more granular level, scholarship on color-blind racism in education calls our attention to schools that have overtly declared themselves to be color-blind (Schofield, 2010). Schofield’s (2010) extensive ethnography of the “Wexler” school reveals an over-representation of Black children in their disciplinary processes, indicating that a racialized reality is present in
these schools. However the color-blind racist frame does not allow school administrators to consider race when examining school dynamics and, as noted earlier in this review, race-blind policies fail to address race-based realities. Schofield (2010) concludes that the adherence to color-blind ideology at Wexler prevents the schools’ disciplinary processes from ever coming into question, as the abundance of Black youth being suspended from Wexler is not perceived as a racial issue.

Furthermore, research on overtly color-blind schools observes little to no change in the status quo of “classic” texts and textbooks. These texts normalize White contexts, procedures, and representation while only rarely depicting people of color in meaningful capacities. The continued use of White normative educational materials while remaining committed to a color-blind approach also marginalizes students of color in these educational environments and people of color in the curriculum at large (Castro Atwater, 2008).

Finally, in an ethnography of a predominantly White, middle-class school, White teachers were found to have clear biases towards students of color while claiming color-blindness in their educational approaches (Lewis, 2001). Lewis describes White teachers at this school accusing the few students of color and bi-racial students as playing the race card a lot, meaning that when these students say they are experiencing racial discrimination, they are lying, as this is not possible in a color-blind environment. Furthermore, teachers at this school stated that they had heard White students using racial slurs against the few students of color at the school, but that these were not intended to be racist, they were really “kid put-downs” (Lewis, 2001, p. 790). Lewis contends that this deep contradiction between the teachers’ overt commitment to color-blind rhetoric while explicitly demonstrating biased, race-conscious understanding and practice serves to oppress students of color within the school environment while reflecting a broader
national schema of color-blind racist politics. Lewis’ findings speak to one of the central contradictions in the color-blind racist frame. In a world where race no longer has bearing, how can those who adhere to a color-blind worldview explain encounters with racism? Color-blind racism, as a hegemonic frame, offers a psychic dilemma in which actors are forced to transform children using racist language into kids “putting each other down” so as to not cause a schism in their color-blind worldview. While Lewis’ observations are highly supported by her ethnographic research and evidence, the implications of this central contradiction in color-blind racism are explored in greater depth in social psychology research and will be examined in the following section of this review.

In the literature on higher education, color-blind racism has severe implications for university policy and structure. Campus environments are normatively White and Eurocentric, but in color-blind racism are treated as race-neutral (Stage & Manning (1992) as cited in Reason & Evans (2007). Students of color on college campuses are expected to adjust to this supposedly neutral environment, while many White students find campus climate to be reflective of their home environments. This adjustment, and any difficulty experienced by students of color in the process, is located as a problem for students of color in the color-blind frame, thereby obscuring the hegemonic White structure of the university (Yosso & Lopez, 2010).

The university calendar is a powerful example of White, Christo-centric framing being offered as neutral (Stage & Manning (1992) as cited in Reason & Evans (2007). Universities structure their semesters or quarters to start and end in ways that most often leave students with vacation during major Christian holidays, while employing the language of “winter break” (Christmas) or “spring break” (Easter). However, for students of non-Christian faith systems or for Native American students, actively participating in religious or cultural practices while
attending university might require them to miss classes or tests, which can jeopardize their academic success. In color-blind racism, the otherized student that requests an exemption, in the form of excused absences or an alternative test date, to observe their cultural tradition is treated as the problem. This same dynamic impacts students of color who seek to form race-specific student organizations. These students are often seen as self-segregating in the color-blind racist frame, as the dominant student organizations are seen as race-neutral, when they often are White normative. In both of these oppressive dynamics, the framework of color-blind racism takes that which is actually White-normative and positions it as value-neutral. This sleight-of-hand casts students of color as being difficult when they challenge these norms through various counter-normative actions.

In a recent quantitative study of 144 students published in the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, students’ level of color-blind racial attitudes were found to have implications for their perception of campus climate at a predominantly White university (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy & Hart, 2008). Researchers used the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS)\(^3\) to assess correlations with the general campus climate and the racial-ethnic campus climate using the Assessment of Campus Climate for Underrepresented Groups (URG) Scale. The authors of this study found that students with a higher CoBRAS score, or those students that held the greatest level of color-blind racial attitudes and beliefs, seemed to perceive both the general campus climate and the racial-ethnic campus climate more positively. Furthermore, research from this study supported earlier findings that White college students tend to perceive

\(^3\) A 26-item, Likert-type scale designed to assess the extent to which a person subscribes to racial attitudes central to the color-blind racist frame. The CoBRAS is discussed in detail in the psychology section of this review.
campus climate more positively that students of color. An important contribution of this study is the authors’ finding that CoBRAS scores seemed to generate a more nuanced understanding of White student perceptions of general campus climate versus racial-ethnic campus climate, when compared to previous studies that used the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scale to assess this relationship. The authors conclude that SDO is a better measure of overt racial discrimination and attitudes, while COBRAs scores captures the nuanced nature of modern racism more accurately. For this review, the authors’ finding that color-blind racial attitudes limit students’ perception of campus climate is an important contribution to our understanding of color-blind racism, as color-blind attitudes are correlated with a distortion of reality that is necessary for the system of color-blind racism.

In psychology. In psychological research, Neville et al.’s initial study of Color-Blind Racial Attitudes (CoBRA) marks a watershed moment for the study of color-blind racism in the discipline of counseling psychology (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). The timing of this study was crucial, as the theoretical formation of racism to receive the most attention throughout the 1990s was Modern Racism (MR), developed by McConahay (Neville et al., 2000). The Modern Racism Scale (MRS), employed by psychology researchers extensively in the study of MR, assessed people’s prejudicial attitudes towards Black Americans. By the late 1990s, the MRS began to produce decreasing scores when used with large groups of White college students across the country and the authors of the initial CoBRA study felt that this was an indicator of limitations in the MR framework, rather than a sign of decreasing racist attitudes. Neville and her colleagues conducted the initial CoBRA study to connect the relatively nascent literature on color-blind racism with the canonical literature on Modern Racism by creating a scale to assess CoBRAs explicitly, psychometrically, and multidimensionally. The authors of
this study created a 26-item scale, by using Likert-type responses, which they named the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS).

The initial scale was tested on 302 college students, 81% of whom were White, and the results yielded three factors, which the authors termed: Racial Privilege, Institutional Discrimination, and Blatant Racial Issues (Neville et al., 2000). Neville and her team of researchers went on to test these factors in a study involving 594 college students representing greater diversity: 67% White, 19% Black, 5% Latino, 2% Asian American, and 1% Native American (Neville et al., 2000). Subsequently, the study team went back and examined test-retest reliability in a third phase of their project, using 102 college students. Finally, the research group tested the CoBRAS in relation to several other popular scales for measuring racial attitudes, such as the Quick Discrimination Index and the MRS. This fourth phase of the study involved 145 participants, 70% of whom were White. In aggregate, the CoBRAS was found to be very reliable and much more nuanced than previous attempts to measure color-blind racism. The CoBRAS also demonstrated strong concurrent validity in relation to the other indexes of racial attitudes, which led the research team to conclude that higher levels of CoBRAS indicates higher levels of racist beliefs. Aside from this important correlation, Neville et al.’s (2000) initial CoBRAS study is centrally important to this review, as many of the following psychology studies use this scale in their analysis of the varying negative aspects of color-blind racism.

In the years following Neville et al.’s (2000) development of the CoBRA Scale, several key works were produced in psychological research that employed the CoBRAS to test for other implications of color-blind racism. In 2004, Burkard and Knox used the CoBRAS to assess whether color-blindness was related to empathy levels in therapists. The authors state that empathy is considered a key factor in therapy and has been measured to have strong implications
for successful counseling. In order to assess therapist effectiveness with cross-cultural counseling, Burkard and Knox conducted a study of 247 practicing psychologists using four clinical case studies to solicit for participant response. The sample group contained 4 African Americans, 2 Asian Americans, 4 Latina/os, 2 participants that identified as biracial, and 234 European Americans. The case studies were structured to offer the participants two clients that were identified as European-American and two that were identified as African-American. The hypothetical clients, all 18 year-old college students living in residence halls, offered narratives of isolation, homesickness, and possible depression. Using a host of scales, the authors evaluated the participants’ diagnoses of their hypothetical clients and ran correlations to assess the significance of the participants’ level of CoBRAs on their Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) score, which involves several empathy-centered subscales.

Burkard and Knox (2004) found a high correlation between CoBRA scores and therapist empathy, with high levels of color-blind racial attitudes being directly linked to significantly low empathy scores. It is interesting to note that therapists’ empathy scores dropped in relation to both European-American and African-American clients if they held high CoBRA scores. Furthermore, the authors found that, regardless of CoBRAS scores, therapists across the study located the cause of the clients’ problems with the clients themselves – the clients’ race and narratives of discrimination (for African-American clients) did not cause the therapists to locate racism as a possible issue in the clients’ struggles. For the purposes of this study, the authors’ attempt to explain this surprising finding is critically important. Burkard and Knox (2004) theorize that this inability to link African-American clients’ problems with broader systems of racism might emerge from psychotherapy’s own roots in Western values, including individualism and personal responsibility (Burkard & Knox, 2004). The authors conjecture that
this Eurocentric frame may present a barrier to therapists’ ability to effectively serve clients of color. This finding supports earlier critiques in the *Theoretical* section of this review that highlighted the relationship between color-blind racism and the *hegemony of individualism*.

Gushue (2004) also used the CoBRAS to assess mental health practitioners’ effectiveness in working cross-culturally. By examining 158 White graduate students in counseling and clinical psychology, Gushue sought to examine the relationship between therapist CoBRA scores and the perception of client symptom-severity. The author had study participants use a hypothetical counseling center intake form to assess symptom severity. The intake form described a fictional client, Rob, who was struggling with relationship issues, isolation, and anger. In half of the intake forms, Rob is described as white and, in the other half of the intake forms, Rob is described as Black. Gushue (2004) makes use of several different measures to interpret participant evaluations and the study revealed a strong correlation between CoBRA scores and variability in assessing symptom severity for the Black client. Participants with high levels of CoBRAs tended to rate the Black Rob as having very severe symptoms, while participants with low levels of CoBRAs rated the Black Rob as having very low levels of symptom severity. Participants with moderate levels of COBRAs rated the Black Rob as having moderate symptom severity. Alternately, CoBRA scores did not seem to have a significant impact on participants’ evaluations of the White Rob, with all of the severity ratings for this fictitious client falling into a moderate-to-severe cluster.

The results of Gushue’s (2004) study have several implications for this review. The finding that high levels of CoBRAs correlated with participant assessment of symptom severity in the Black Rob supports the theoretical claim that color-blind racism distorts people’s perception of reality. The study participants who held high color-blind beliefs perceived the
Black Rob to be experiencing extremely high symptom severity compared to assessments of the White Rob. This distortion of reality effect, while disturbing, is not surprising, given the wealth of literature on color-blind racism. However, the second half of Gushue’s findings, that low-levels of CoBRAs also correlated with symptom assessment for the Black Rob, is quizzical. Participants with low levels of color-blind attitudes actually underrated symptom severity for the Black Rob as compared to the White Rob. Gushue offers the explanation that these participants may be taking systemic racism into account when evaluating the Black Rob’s symptoms and, therefore, concluding that the clients’ feelings of anger and isolation are not severe, but appropriate. These particular findings further complicate the distortion of reality thesis, as participants with very low levels of COBRAs also demonstrated skewed judgment by actually taking race into account. This complication does not undo the distortion of reality thesis, but introduces the idea that color-blindness is not the only meaning-making lens when it comes to matters of race.

Gushue (2004) also warns his audience that White psychology students with a high awareness of racism might actually try and downplay the significance of race in their assessment (so as to not appear racist), which would generate the same results as the participants that made a nuanced calculation of the impact of racism on the Black Rob’s symptoms. This convergence of results, for very different reasons, is deeply problematic for the profession of counseling psychology; Gushue concludes that multicultural trainers in the psychology profession must take this into account when educating graduate students.

Further studies utilize the CoBRAS to examine attitudes towards affirmative action (Awad, Cokley, & Ravitch, 2005) and impact on Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006). The former study reveals that the CoBRAS might be a
stronger indicator of attitudes towards affirmative action that the Modern Racism Scale while the latter study yields several important findings about color-blind racism. Neville, Spanierman, and Doan (2006) found strong correlations between high levels of CoBRAs and lower-levels of MCCs. This adds to the ongoing study of the impact of counselors’ attitudes and beliefs on their ability to accurately evaluate and effectively treat clients’ problems. The authors also found that, in some cases, study participants could have both high levels of CoBRAs and high levels of MCC, to which they conclude the need for revisions to MCC criteria, as color-blind racism presents a level of nuance that MCC measurements do not account for. This, in concert with previous findings on the limitations of Social Dominance Orientation and the Modern Racism Scale, is a powerful testament to the paradigm-shift that color-blind racism signifies. Tools that were developed to assess and engage the impact of previous manifestations of racism do not seem properly calibrated when used in the era of color-blind racism.

Finally, an example of recent psychological research that does not employ the CoBRAS is the 2010 study of the impact of color-blind racism on elementary school children’s ability to identify discrimination and properly report it (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). Apfelbaum and his colleagues conducted an experiment using an elementary school classroom and a teacher that announces to the students that they will be critically evaluating a digital storybook that will be marketed to students in earlier grade-levels. In one test-group of the experiment, a group of fourth and fifth graders viewed a story that contained several key moments where racial difference was minimized using color-blind framing. In another test-group, fourth and fifth-grade students viewed a very similar story, but this time the narrative employed a value-diversity, or color-conscious, framework at several key moments of the plot. Both digital storybooks claimed to be tales of racial justice.
Following the storybook viewing, the teacher left the room and the two test groups were introduced to an outside facilitator who read them three different accounts of discrimination that allegedly occurred at nearby schools. After all three scenarios were shared, the students were asked to retell the main parts of the three stories they heard. Apfelbaum et al. (2010) found that the students who had been exposed to the color-blind digital storybook were significantly less able to perceive discrimination in the three incidents, even in examples where discrimination was explicitly represented. The students who were exposed to the value-diversity narrative were much more accurately able to identify discrimination in the incidents, even in the stories that contained nuanced representations of discrimination.

A final part of the experiment involved the outside facilitator leaving the room and the teacher re-entering the classroom and asking the students about the incidents. Apfelbaum et al. (2010) report that the students that were initially exposed to the color-blind digital storybook were also significantly less able to report the incidents of discrimination to the teacher. The students from the value-diversity group, however, were able to report the bias-incidents to the teacher with greater accuracy. While the findings from the perception of discrimination portion of the experiment serve to support previously reviewed research on the reality-distorting effects of color-blind racism, the final component of the Apfelbaum et al. study is an important addition to this review. As the authors note, if the color-blind racist frame has the potential to inhibit the accurate reporting of discriminatory incidents, a falsereality can be created and perpetuated where racism goes unnoticed and unaddressed. This finding compliments earlier theoretical critiques linking color-blind racism to notions of American meritocracy; color-blind racism can possibly create a false impression of both a decline in the number of racist incidents and the prominence of race in daily life by significantly diminishing individuals’ ability to see racism.
and/or effectively report it. This dynamic represents a perpetuating cycle that enhances popularly held notions of American meritocracy by minimizing the role of racism in structuring inequality into modern life.

Earlier in this review, I took special note of Forman’s (2004) contention that color-blind racism is more indirect, and therefore less harmful, than the direct racism of the Jim Crow era. The research examined in the psychology section of this review seems to challenge Forman’s ideas of indirect versus direct harm. When taken in aggregate, research in the field of psychology strongly indicates that people of color stand to receive poorer mental health services due to color-blind racism. This could very well constitute direct harm, as mental health misdiagnosis and symptom misperception could result in grievous psychological damage. Color-blind racism also appears to have the subtle effect of biasing Americans against affirmative action. If affirmative action is understood as the color-conscious policy that scholars like Aleinikoff (1991), Esposito and Finley (2009), or Wise (2010) are calling for, this also could indicate a sort of direct-harm effect from color-blind racism. Finally, color-blind racism, as a more nuanced framework, offers challenges to frequently-used research tools like the Modern Racism Scale or Social Dominance Orientation. This has serious implications for the social sciences, as important studies that continue to use these tools might offer skewed results that indicate a false reality of declining racial bias. These types of results have the potential to undermine people of color’s claims of racial injustice and, therefore, undermine the current legitimacy of movements for racial justice. These conclusions offer a strong challenge to Forman’s (2004) assertion of color-blind racism as indirect harm and remind us that the shift from Jim Crow, overt racism to covert, hegemonic racism should not be taken lightly.
In this section, I have reviewed the literature on color-blind racism. By surveying the theoretical and applied critiques of color-blind racism and post-raciality, I hope to have established the parameters through which I will investigate the racial meaning-making terrain of Asian American college students. In this next section of this chapter, I will review the literature on Asian American Critical Race Theory.

**Asian American Critical Race Theory**

Asian Americans are made, not born. (Wu, 2002, p.307)

Wu reminds us that one of the first challenges in conducting scholarly work on Asian American racial identity is the constructed nature of both the Asian American community and Asian American racial identity. Emerging from a series of “Third World Strikes” at San Francisco State University in 1968, the term “Asian American” itself is the product of both socio-historical circumstance and strategic maneuvering by oppressed peoples (Umemoto, 1989). It is an explicitly racial term, developed in the context of struggle within a White racial state and, therefore, particularly salient to this dissertation study.

Since this dissertation study focuses on Asian American undergraduate students’ racial meaning making process, two bodies of literature inform the way I frame my subjects’ identities. First, the theoretical scholarship on Asian American race, informed by racial formation theory and Critical Race Theory, is foundational because it is my contention that this scholarship is notably absent from the college student identity development literature. Critical theoretical work on Asian American racial identity prompts us to situate any analysis of race within this contested terrain of state power, community agency, and critical historicity. Second, the identity development and acculturation scholarship on Asian American college students is important
because I hope to contribute to this literature through my research findings. Finally, I review literature from the identity development and acculturation scholarship in an attempt to capture the overall terrain of the foundational scholarship for my study.

**Racial identity and Asian American college students.** Asian American Critical Race Theorists often employ three central tropes to analyze Asian American racial identity and experience: the Model Minority stereotype, the Perpetual/Forever Foreigner stereotype, and the essentializing nature of the “Asian American” panethnic label (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2006; Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, & Dodd, 2006; Junn, 2007; Kawai, 2005; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). In the specific context of Asian American college student racial identity, the first two tropes play an important role in structuring both how Asian American students think of themselves and how university campuses position and serve these students. In this sub-section of my literature review, I examine how a wide variety of scholars have theorized on the ways that Model Minority and Forever Foreigner mythologies work in isolation, and together, to construct a marginalized Asian American racial identity. One important theoretical issue to note before proceeding is the dialectical tension and conceptual blurriness between ethnic identification and racial identification in Asian American identity development. Scholarship on this subject points to important linkages between individuals’ ethnic identities and their racial identities (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). Scholarship on Asian American race and ethnic identity also indicates that, within the small body of scholarship on the subject, the majority of researchers have tended to focus on Asian American ethnic identity and acculturation processes rather than on race and racism, thereby downplaying the salience and relevance of these issues through omission (Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2009; Kim, 2012). For the purposes of my study, I wish to acknowledge the important role of ethnicity in
individuals’ identity development while selectively focusing my research on race and color-blind racism. This narrower focus is not intended to downplay the importance of ethnicity in Asian American identity development, but to address an extreme dearth of research on Asian American racial identity.

Junn (2007) writes that the Model Minority stereotype is a sharp departure from the 19th century racialization of Asian American laborers as coolies in her article, “From Coolie to Model Minority: U.S. Immigration Policy and the Construction of Racial Identity.” Junn (2007) traces the movement of the dominant Asian American stereotype from coolie to model minority in the U.S. policy shift during the Cold War space race in the 1960s. In an attempt to compete with the Soviet Union in the science theater of the Cold War, the United States revised its long standing ban on Asian immigration in the 1965 Immigration Act, allowing for Asians to once again enter America in large numbers. The Model Minority typology, however, is created by selective immigration criteria tied to the Immigration Act that placed a preference on legal entry for Asians with science, math, and medical degrees that could help the United States develop a powerful research and development base through which to compete with the Soviet Union. This selection criteria resulted in a constructed community of post-1965 Asian Americans that, due to the broader socio-political circumstance, happened to be academically gifted, extremely hard working, focused on upward mobility, and ready to play “within the lines” of White-dominated society. Junn’s (2007) analysis, drawing on racial formation theory, casts the Model Minority stereotype as a racial project that the nation state built to address specific domestic labor needs as well as foreign policy interests.

This historical background is imperative in understanding Asian American race theory, as the Model Minority stereotype is the dominant narrative that shapes Asian American college
student experience (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). Critical scholarship on this trope uncovers the various ways that it supports White hegemony while simultaneously socializing and oppressing Asian American students. An embedded narrative within the Model Minority framework is the idea that Asian Americans have “succeeded” and that they have “done it on their own.” This assertion supports post-civil rights claims that America represents a racial meritocracy, which is a key master narrative of White hegemony and color-blind racism (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009; Kawai, 2005). Beyond supporting meritocratic mythologies, the Model Minority trope works as a wedge tool, positioning Asian Americans against other “unsuccessful” people of color groups who, in the inverse logic, have “failed to do it on their own” in the post-Civil Rights era. Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) argue that this valorization of Asian Americans by the White state contributes to the marginalization and isolation of Asian Americans from other communities of color. This “wedge-tool” argument is important for understanding the way that Asian Americans have been used, discursively, to oppress other people of color, strengthen the neoliberal state, and extend White hegemony.

This politics of racial triangulation also has serious consequences for the way Asian Americans conceptualize their own racial identity. Junn (2007) notes that Asian Americans are, within the context of the White-Black binary, offered an honorary Whiteness that has resulted in higher levels of racial alienation for Asian Americans. Being positioned as discursive Whites is an integral component of the background context for understanding the racial experience of Asian American college students. In higher education, this honorary Whiteness moves from the background to the foreground as Asian Americans are often lumped with Whites in the discourse surrounding affirmative action and student success (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante,
Honorary whiteness and racial alienation are key constructs for my dissertation research on the relationship between color-blind racism and racial identity formation.

After several decades of enduring under the auspices of honorary whiteness, Asian Americans also face many barriers to developing strong racial group consciousness (Junn & Masuoka, 2008). Racial group consciousness, which is well-researched in the Black community, can serve as a poignant link to the scholarship on college student racial identity development. Strong racial identity development is positioned as extremely positive in this literature and barriers to this development that emerge from the critical theoretical work on Asian American race represent fertile exploratory ground in my study (Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Torres, Jones, Renn, 2009).

By examining survey results on racial consciousness affinity and racial political identity, Junn and Masuoka (2008) offer the following list of factors that may lead Asian American group members to possess lower racial consciousness:

- The salience of ethnic group identity over racial identity
- The ability to have more economic and social mobility in US society than Blacks or Latina/os (tied to Model Minority selection criteria)
- The connection between increased social mobility and the dissolution of ethnic enclave communities that can preserve racial consciousness
- The relatively nascent nature of the Asian American community – most arrived after 1965 (again, due to U.S. immigration policy and the Asian Exclusion Acts) and this recent immigration cuts most of the Asian American community off of the legacy of overt racial oppression in the 19th century
The Model Minority stereotype offers a more “positive” and individualistic framework of thinking of one’s self that may lessen tendencies towards racial group consciousness. Junn’s (2007) analysis of the connections between the coolie and Model Minority archetype provides an important theoretical bridge from our first racial trope to our second trope: Forever Foreigner. Junn (2007) notes that, although being cast as a Model Minority is seemingly more “positive” than the dirty, unassimilable, untrustworthy coolie of the 19th century, the Model Minority trope has elements of xenophobia embedded deep within its logic. Junn (2007) argues that the Model Minority stereotype lauds Asian Americans for being honorary Whites while simultaneously asserting that there is something essentially Asian about this group, no matter how long they have been in America. White hegemony flaunts the specters of Yellow Peril and the invading Asian Horde in the historical White imaginary to exacerbate xenophobic tensions surrounding Asian immigrants (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). This results in the Model Minority mythology feeding an older, but still pervasive, stereotype that plagues the Asian American community: the Forever Foreigner. Dating back to when Asian migrants were deemed aliens ineligible for citizenship, the Forever Foreigner stereotype denies Asian Americans full access to their citizenship (Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1998). Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007) argue that this civic ostracism is a key reason why critical theoretical work on Asian American race must distinguish the different ways that White hegemony works on varying communities. Critical scholarship on Forever Foreigner racialization challenges us to acknowledge the limitations of the Black:White binary in racial analysis and call for a unique consideration of Asian American racial identity.

Kawai (2005) carries this Forever Foreigner analysis one step further by noting the way that this stereotype positions Asian Americans as a threat to the (White) U.S. nation state. In her work, “Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow
Peril,” she forcefully argues that the Forever Foreigner stereotype casts Asian Americans as outside of U.S. cultural norms, being more Asian than American, and positions them in a competitive relationship with White Americans. The ghost of 19th century Yellow Peril emerges during periods of economic downturn, wearing the face of Japan in the 1980s and India and China in the 1990s and 2000s. Asian Americans are caught in this globalized cross-fire and as a result, experience unique marginality and risk.

Chou and Feagin’s (2010) recent book-length study, “The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism,” reveals the lived impact of this theoretical positioning, as Asian American college students report experiencing enormous racism on college campuses, often due to being associated with international competitive contexts. Chou and Feagin (2010) write that, in Southern California, college-age Asian Americans face hostility from their White counterparts due to the perception that there are too many Asian Americans in the University of California system. The authors note that slang nicknames have even emerged from this tension for the University of California – Irvine (UC-I) and the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA): “The University of Chinese Immigrants” and “The University of Caucasians Lost among Asians” respectively (Chou & Feagin, 2010, p. 69). These nicknames, when taking into a sociohistorical context of Model Minority and Forever Foreigner statuses signal an atmosphere of anti-Asian hostility that is both pervasive as well as accepted as harmless and normal.

This complex constellation of racial tropes, alongside the pervasive nature of White hegemony, offers many barriers to the publication of research on Asian American college student racial identity. In a recent study, Museus and Kiang (2009) found that less than 1% of the articles in the most-widely-read peer reviewed higher education journals were about Asian American college students. Of the few articles that do see publication, most avoid considering
questions of Asian American race, racial identity, and anti-Asian racism in favor of analyses of ethnic identification and cultural adjustment issues (Alvarez, 2002; Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, & Dodd, 2006). A possible explanation for this can be found in the critical theoretical literature, reviewed previously, that argues that Asian Americans are de-racialized as part of Model Minority stereotyping, honorary Whiteness, and anti-Blackness. Buenavista, Jayakumar, and Misa-Escalante (2009) argue that a Critical Race Theory analysis of the racial reality for Asian Americans reveals that the Model Minority stereotype positions Asian Americans as overrepresented at elite institutions, as well as not at-risk in higher education in general. In aggregate, the topography of the literature on Asian Americans in higher education is bleak and underwhelming. Asian Americans are largely obscured in the higher education literature and, when they appear, are often whitewashed and recast as deracinated model students.

To conclude, this section of my review offers a brief capture of the literature on Asian American racial identity theory. By focusing on the Model Minority and Forever Foreigner tropes, I hoped to illuminate the severe margins that limit an Asian American race consciousness while also taking note of the links between this group’s racial formation and White hegemony. These tropes provide crucial political context to the next section of this review, where I briefly survey the scholarship on racial identity development in Asian American college students.

**Asian American college students: Racial identity development.** Given the numerous barriers to conducting research on Asian American students, along with the normative deracination of Asian American people at large, there are only a few studies that examine how Asian American college students construct their racial identity and are worth noting in the context of this review. At the start of the new millennium, Alvarez and Helms (2001) and Alvarez (2002) began to consider the value in applying Helms’ (1990) now canonical racial
identity schema to examining Asian American college students. Although originally designed to as a psychodiagnostic model for understanding how White and Black students develop racial identity schemas, these authors argue that Helms’ model can help explain a racial acculturation process that many Asian American college students undergo. Helms’ six-stage model offers a way for higher education administrators and educators to understand that many Asian American students might enter college with a color-blind worldview (Stage 1 - Conformity) and that encountering racism would move them to a place of racial dissonance (Stage 2 – Dissonance). The model proposes several other stages (Immersion, Emersion, Internalization, and Integrative awareness) and, like all modern stage theories, acknowledges that each student might have their own pathway towards integrative awareness, skipping stages and moving backwards and forwards along the way. While encountering racism is a key catalyst for students moving from Conformity to Dissonance, Alvarez (2002) also notes that Asian American student organizations, curricular programs, or cultural celebrations may challenge Asian American college students to abandon a color-blind worldview.

The catalytic role of racism in molding racial consciousness receives more focused attention in Alvarez, Juang, and Liang’s (2006) study, “Asian Americans and Racism: When Bad Things Happen to “Model Minorities”.” The authors use multiple quantitative scales to conduct a large survey of Asian American college students (N = 254) and find, among other findings, that these students’ ability to identify racism is intimately connected to their own racial identity schema. Similar to earlier studies, they employ Helms’ (1990) stage model to assess each student’s racial identity status and conclude that a key gap in the literature is a study of how Asian American college students have been socialized to think about race. Helms’ (1990) model calls these ideological narratives “sociocultural communicators” and this largely unexamined
relationship between racial narratives (color-blind racism), racial identity schemas, and the perception of racism for Asian American college students is a useful framework for my own study.

Similar to Alvarez, Juang, and Liang’s (2006) study, Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, and Dodd’s (2006) quantitative study of a large number (N = 344) of Asian Americans attempts to link Helms’ (1990) stage model, the People of Color Racial Identity Awareness Scale (PCRIAS), with other models for understanding racial attitudes, the Asian American Racism-Related Stress Inventory (AARRSI) and the Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS). The authors argue for an explicit study of Asian American racial identity while noting that a bulk of the work on this under-studied group focuses on ethnic identity and cultural adjustment. This overemphasis on ethnicity and culture, in turn, contributes to the minimization of the role of race and racism in the identity development of Asian Americans.

Chen et al. (2006) use a cluster analysis to investigate whether subject clusters in different stages of Helms’ identity development model correlated with various attitudinal groups from the AARRSI and CoBRAS models. The study revealed that participants from the high Internalization cluster tended to also demonstrate low racism-related stress awareness. This was a surprising finding, one that differs from Helms’ original studies with Black participants, and the authors suggest that Asian Americans might be being classified as high Internalization because they are supplying politically correct, or socially desirable, answers to the PCRIAS survey. The authors also found a large grouping of participants in the Conformity cluster, the majority of whom also scored high on the CoBRAS, revealing high levels of color-blind attitudes. This was a significant finding, in that the authors note that other studies using the PCRIAS and Black participants revealed no clusters for the Conformity category. These
findings, amongst others, led the authors to conclude that Asian Americans might be experiencing race differently than Black Americans and the authors call for more scholarly attention to the study of racial identity and racism in Asian American groups.

The two identity development models developed expressly from studying Asian Americans that are often cited in the student development literature are Kim’s (2001) Asian American Identity Development (AAID) model and Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee’s (2002) psychosocial model. Kim’s model was developed from her 1981 dissertation study and offers a five stage model to understand racial identity development in Asian American college students. Her unpublished dissertation is often cited in the “ethnic identity” sections of books on college student identity development (e.g. Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011), particularly because, for two decades, it was the only available identity development model for Asian American college students. The current utility of Kim’s study is narrow, however, as it attempted to offer a generalized identity development model based on research conducted with a group of Japanese American women. The limitations in the study sample, along with the dated nature of the work in general, make Kim’s identity development model less useful for practitioners today. During the writing of this dissertation, however, Kim (2012) released a major update to her model, changing the name to the Asian American Racial Identity Development (AARID) Model. The AARID incorporates much of the critical scholarship on Asian Americans that was published between 1981 and 2012, except for color-blind racism, and will be discussed in depth in the discussion section of this dissertation.

Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee’s (2002) work is the other available identity development model for Asian American college students and these authors employ a more critical approach to their scholarship, beginning with a powerful statement on the limitations of
student development theory, broadly, for helping us understand Asian American college student identity in particular. The authors focus their critique on Chickering and Reiser’s (1993) psychosocial development theory, which is one of the foundational theories in the field of student affairs. They argue that Chickering and Reiser’s (1993) work fails to take into account powerful cultural and political influences on Asian American college student identity development and they propose a new model that centers these students’ identities on a horizontal axis with one end being “Family/Cultural” influences and the other being “Societal” influences. One area that this dissertation could contribute to this model is in further nuancing the “Societal” influences to account for the pervasive discourse of color-blind racism and its contributions to the way Asian American college students come to understand their racial identity.

New Directions in College Student Development Theory

…why have research methods on college student development not kept pace with the proliferation of social theory since the 1970s addressing the connection between culture, power, and knowledge? (Tanaka, 2002, p. 263)

I open this final section of my literature review with this quotation from Tanaka because my own study of Asian American college student racial identity development attempts respond to Tanaka’s (2002) critique and link the insights of critical theory with the core of college student development theory. In this final section of my literature review, I will review several recent publications that strive to address this gap as well. While these authors have not written explicitly about Asian American college student development, they have employed theoretical tools and insights that come from critical and postmodern paradigms to differently situate how we understand and theorize college student identity development. In reviewing each of these
articles, I will attempt to highlight specific methodological and theoretical elements that offer both nuance and direction to my study.

In her 2009 article, “Theoretical Borderlands: Using Multiple Theoretical Perspectives to Challenge Inequitable Power Structures in Student Development Theory,” Abes suggests that college student development scholars employ a borderlands approach to theorizing the psychosocial development of college students. Borrowing from Anzaldua’s (1999) scholarship on hybridity, Abes (2009) offers that employing multiple, even contradictory, analytical paradigms can produce insights into college student identity that are not possible when only using one paradigm. Abes (2009) suggests that this experimental approach might uncover new insights in the identity development of marginalized college students. She goes on to suggest a blended, critical postmodernist lens where the gains of critical theory and postmodernism work together to produce a deeper, richer analysis.

In her own research on lesbian college students, Abes (2009) finds that constructivism allows for a greater understanding of the meaning-making process for each college student in her study, but often falls short in understanding the broader power structures that can shape that process for individuals. Abes (2009) employs queer theory, which draws from postmodernism and poststructuralism, to problematize heteronormativity and complicate queer identity. She writes, “… whereas poststructuralist theories seek to deconstruct reality, interpretivist theories, including constructivism, seek to understand the construction of realities” (2009, p. 144). This hybrid, critical postmodern framework offers a way to attend to meaning-making processes as well as dominant power structures when studying the identity of college students.
Renn’s 2003 study of mixed-race college student identity development attempts to address the shortcomings of traditional college student development literature on racial identity by employing an ecological model from human development literature. Renn (2003) begins her article by arguing that traditional stage models and ethnic identity development models used to understand college students of color do not effectively capture complex identity development patterns for mixed-race students. She turns to developmental ecology because this framework challenges the normative logic that divides the university environment into false dichotomies, such as inside the classroom versus outside the classroom or on-campus versus off-campus. In particular, Renn (2003) draws from the research of Bronfenbrenner (1979), in which human beings are understood as being situated in multiple, overlapping complex environments. These nested contexts form a web in which humans come to understand both themselves and the world. Renn (2003) notes that Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model challenges us to think about college students not only as embedded in campus environments, but also as embedded in national and international ecological contexts that shape their identities as well.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model locates the individual in microsystems and, moving outward, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Each of these more distal contexts continues to shape identity, while also offering people less and less agency to affect the context. Renn (2003) writes, “Macrosystems, the most distal levels of environmental influence, are also missing from traditional student development research” (p. 389). Renn’s use of nested ecological contexts offers particular utility for my study because I also theorize Asian American college students as undergoing a meaning-making process within multiple ecological contexts that work to constitute their subjectivity in different ways. For example, micro and exosystems of college campuses can offer Asian American students a daily experience of racial
microaggressions\(^4\) while the contemporary American macrosystem offers them a narrative of post-raciality intimately tied to the politics of color-blind racism (Chou & Feagin, 2010). Renn’s (2003) work on mixed-race college student development is helpful in unpacking the complex, interstitial nature of human development that is often overlooked in the traditional research.

Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) begin their article with the argument that student development theories are, “…limited in their use of language about race and considerations of the roles of racism in students’ development and learning” (p. 39). They go on to note that much of the canonical college student development literature, such as Chickering and Reiser (1993), Baxter-Magolda (1992), and Kohlberg (1975) represents a racelessness that is deeply problematic. The authors suggest that CRT could help close the current gap in the literature and conduct a detailed explanation of how CRT works in the scholarship of higher education. They contend that CRT can add to our understanding of racial salience by positioning race as one of many intersectional identities that college students hold. CRT emphasizes intersectionality and could help move college student development literature past frameworks that myopically examine race outside of the context of other socially constructed identities. The CRT framework is foundational to my research not only in the way that I theorize race, but also in its call for understanding race as one of many interwoven social identities that students hold.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) represents an identity model that situates identity socially, historically, politically, and culturally.

\(^4\) Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007) define racial microaggressions as, “…brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (p. 72).
The authors emphasize the critical role of context in the meaning-making process, thereby attempting to balance individual agency with institutional power. The reconceptualized MMDI examines the relationship between identity salience, meaning-making processes, and social context to reveal that each student possesses varying levels of meaning-making capacity. According to the authors, paying attention to capacity is crucial because, “Incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model provides a richer portrayal of not only what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do” (2007, p. 13). For my study, careful attention to the what and how revealed important nuance in how Asian American students internalized hegemonic discourses of race in their own meaning-making processes.

The MMDI also offers the framework of core and social identity. Abes et al. (2007) found significant complexity to whether students counted an identity as social or core and why they felt the way they did. For my study, the framework of core and social identity offers a better way map out identity salience patterns for Asian American students as I explore the important why that each student employs when deciding whether their race is a social identity or part of their core. Finally, the authors of the revised MMDI offer a complex integration of the self-authorship framework (meaning-making) with core elements of the critical paradigm (intersectionality, social/political/historical context) that is useful as a model for my own study. I am deeply interested in meaning-making processes but often find the literature on self-authorship lacking in its attention to the constitutive nature of power and dominant discourse. Conversely, the critical paradigm has the tendency to elide individual agency and heterogeneity in favor of
examining hegemony⁵ and I feel it is important to recognize that individual college students still play an important role in constructing their own identities. The revised MMDI, in my estimation, represents the best practice of the multitude of recommendations reviewed in this essay.

**Rationale for my Study**

In this chapter, I reviewed the relevant scholarship for my primary theoretical lens, color-blind racism, and my secondary lenses, Asian American Critical Race Theory and college student development theory. I explored the mechanics and impact of color-blind racism through a detailed examination of the theoretical and applied critical scholarship. I then reviewed the Critical Race Theory scholarship on Asian American racial identity to create a broader political context in which to understand the literature on Asian American college students’ racial identity development. Finally, I surveyed several recent works in college student development theory that offer direction and nuance for my own research on the meaning-making process of Asian American college freshmen.

In aggregate, this review offers a compelling argument for my study. Color-blind racism and the hegemonic construction of Asian American racial identity seem to collude seamlessly to produce intense marginality for Asian American group members, while also supporting a system of White racial supremacy. Asian Americans, broadly, and Asian American college students, in particular, remain understudied and under-theorized, and my research has the potential to contribute to not only our understanding of color-blind racism, but also to the important project

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⁵ For a nuanced capture of the tension between critical theory and “deconstructive anti-essentialism” (p. 204) see Fraser (1996).
of racial consciousness-building for Asian Americans at large. The college student development literature seems to indicate that the meaning-making process in college students offers fertile ground for conducting this type of intersectional analysis. It is my hope that higher education administrators will be able to utilize the results of this study to better serve Asian American students while also challenging inequitable systems and practices at the university level.
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Introduction

The previous chapter summarized several key bodies of scholarship that are foundational to this study. This chapter is an overview of the methodology and method that used to conduct my research and analyze my data. I conducted semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) with Asian American college freshmen. The participants’ reflections and stories served as the data through which I examined the interplay between color-blind racism and racial identity formation and meaning making processes. This study will add to the existing body of knowledge by connecting the rich theoretical work on color-blind racism with the growing scholarship on the lived experience of Asian American college students. It is my hope that this study will help both higher education faculty and staff, as well as anti-racist activists, understand the hegemonic dynamics of color-blind racism better, so that we may more effectively resist this modern form of oppression.

Research Questions

This study is organized around one central research question and several sub-questions:

How do first-year Asian American students at an urban, private university in the Midwest make meaning of their racial identity in an era of color-blind racism?

• How do these students racially identify and understand that identity in their life stories?

• What do these students learn about race in their home communities and in their first year of college?

• What, if any, tenets of color-blind racism have they internalized and/or contested in their meaning-making process?
These questions informed my methodological choices, interview questions, and data analysis.

**Qualitative Research and Narrative Inquiry**

I am keenly interested in understanding the lived experience of Asian American college students, their meaning-making process, and the role that stories play in shaping how we understand ourselves and the world. Creswell (2009) writes, “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). For my study, the problem in question is one’s racial identity, how it is formed, and how a specific form of racism might be present in this process. Qualitative research also breaks from positivist or post-positivist paradigms in its assertion that there is more than one knowable reality (Merriam, 2009). This assertion is useful in my study as I attempt to elicit stories from my participants that reveal how they see the world.

As a qualitative researcher, it is important that I state explicitly the philosophical framework that guided my research agenda. Critical theory or, more specifically, Critical Race Theory (CRT), served as an inquiry paradigm in my research, guiding both the ontological and epistemological framing of my research problem and research questions (Schram, 2006). Critical theory, in general, is concerned with dissolving inequities by empowering individuals and groups to assert their full voice in society (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Qualitative research, when conducted through a critical framework, often employs certain ideologies that guide the research praxis (Willis, 2007). Ideologically, CRT not only shapes how race and racism are conceptualized in this dissertation (see “Theoretical Frameworks” section in Chapter 1), but CRT also guided my research method by centralizing the role of stories and counter-narrative storytelling and encouraging researcher reflexivity (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Twine & Warren, 2000).
This qualitative study is an inductive study using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Patton 2002). Merriam (2009) writes, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). The selection-criteria that drove my sampling strategy were identification with an Asian ethnic identity, identification as a domestic student, having completed their K-12 education in the United States, and status as college freshmen. The purpose for each of these sampling criteria is discussed in the “Sampling, Participant Selection, and Sampling Issues” section of this chapter.

Since this study is an attempt to better understand meaning making processes, I opted to use narrative inquiry to conduct my research. Rankin-Brown (cited in Willis, 2007) states, “Narrative research involves using stories to inquire about events, feelings, thoughts, and the meaning of a story with another…Narrative research recaptures the art of storytelling and draws attention to its important role in sharing knowledge with others” (p. 296). In narrative inquiry, the story is not seen as a metaphor, but as concrete data itself. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain that, “…narrative is both phenomenon and method” (p. 2). They note that narrative inquiry is particularly useful for research in educational settings, which are ripe with stories; both the stories of the teachers and the learners. Riessman (2008) balances this approach to narrative-as-data by emphasizing the role of “close interpretation” in making meaning of the stories collected (p. 3).

This emphasis on feelings, thoughts, and meaning is critical for this study, as I focused on my study participants’ reflections on the role of race in their life, and I considered the resulting implications for the meaning of race, identity formation processes, and hegemonic ideology. Schram (2006) describes this two-part approach thusly, “…[the researcher is able to] analyze not
only meanings and motives but also how those meanings and motives connect to the ways people structure their experience” (p. 105). Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to the research agenda of this study because narratives live at both the individual and community level. Part of what I was searching for was whether individual Asian American college students are forming a sense of their racial identity in relation to the broader narrative of the Asian American experience. Reissman (2008) captures this tension as she writes, “It is important to note that while personal stories are certainly prevalent in contemporary life…narrative has a robust life beyond the individual. As persons construct stories of experience, so too do identity groups, communities…” (p. 7).

Narrative inquiry’s emphasis on story and storytelling also benefits my research because my study’s participants were college students of color, a group whose voices and stories have been systematically obscured, and the process of telling their stories could potentially be empowering and/or cathartic for them. Ladson-Billings (2009) links the role of stories in narrative inquiry and CRT writing, “This use of story [in CRT] is of particular interest to educators because of the growing popularity of narrative inquiry…” (p. 23). She proceeds to argue that CRT can contribute to the important work of making sure that all stories are given their rightful attention and that CRT centralizes the role of power in conferring legitimacy to some stories while obscuring or subtly mocking others. Methodologically, I attempted to take advantage of this powerful overlap between narrative inquiry and CRT in order to not only highlight the counter-stories of Asian American college students, but also to call attention to the hegemonic stories that sustain color-blind racism.
The Site

In this dissertation, the site for this study will be referred to by a pseudonym: The University. More specifically, the students in this study were selected through a program at The University called ACHIEVE, also a pseudonym. The University is a large, urban, private, religiously-affiliated institution that is both racially and socioeconomically diverse (approximately a third of each entering freshman class is students of color and a quarter of each freshman class receives the full Pell Grant award). The ACHIEVE program is a first-year mentoring initiative for students of color and first-generation White college students. ACHIEVE targets these two groups due to their historic tendency to unsuccessfully persist through to a four-year graduation at The University. When a freshman student opts into ACHIEVE, they are paired with a peer mentor that works with them on five dimensions of college success: academic excellence, financial fitness, career planning, emotional wellness, and social networking. By conducting participant solicitation through ACHIEVE, I had hoped to increase my chances of attaining a full study sample. All ACHIEVE students are racially identified in the program’s database, so the primary advantage in working through this program was the ability to conduct targeted outreach just to Asian American students. Secondly, it was my thinking that these students would be relatively more likely to respond to my request for participation than students not engaged in any program or service. Asian American ACHIEVE students received the e-letter soliciting for participation from the ACHIEVE program coordinator, someone that they knew and trusted. It was my hope that this familiarity would increase the number of students that would be willing to participate in lengthy interviews. It is important to note that although ACHIEVE students are targeted for participation in the mentoring program due to being either students of color or first-generation college students, the program curriculum does not explicitly
engage racial identity development in the peer mentoring relationship. So, ACHIEVE students do not have any particular or special knowledge of issues of race, power, and/or color-blind racism.

**Sampling, Participant Selection, and Sampling Issues**

Because this study is focused on students that hold specific identities, purposeful theoretical sampling, as cited by Patton (1990), offered me great utility as a researcher. In theory-based sampling, the researcher samples, “…people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs. The sample becomes, by definition, representative of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 177). In order to better understand the relationship between color-blind racism and Asian American college student identity development, I created a set of criteria to guide the development of a purposeful sample. By applying the criteria to eliminate certain students from the study, I hoped to include the most information-rich cases in my study. As Patton (1990) indicates, “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 169). I used these selection criteria with each student that responded to the participant solicitation email by conducting a brief phone conversation with each interested student. The criteria were:

- **Identification as Asian:** Participants had to indicate their ethnic identity. Respondents that did not hold Asian ethnic identities, or who indicated that they were multi-racial, were eliminated from the study. Since this was a study of Asian American racial meaning-making, adding multi-racial participants to the study would have added a dimension of complexity that the study was not designed to address.
- **Identification as a domestic student**: Participants had to indicate whether they are an international student, and those that identified as such were eliminated from the study. Since this was a study of the dynamics of race and identity development in the American context, students from other countries would not represent a rich case of the phenomenon of interest.

- **Having been through the U.S. K-12 school system**: There are many domestic, Asian American college students that immigrated to American in their teenage years. These students are not international students, but they also did not experience the majority of their formative years in the U.S. Since this was a study of the role of race and racial meaning-making in the U.S. context, students that did not complete their K-12 education in the U.S. were eliminated from the study.

- **Status as a college freshman**: Students were asked to indicate their college-year status. Those that were not freshmen were eliminated from the study. This was a study of students’ identification and meaning-making process at the start of their collegiate experience. In order to better understand Asian American students in the state that they entered college, students that had already completed their freshmen year were eliminated from the study. My emphasis on freshmen college students was important to my study because I wanted to examine the meaning-making process of students that had not significantly changed the way they think about their identity as a result of collegiate experience. The University is structured around a liberal arts curriculum and students take many classes that engage identity, including race, regardless of their major. In their sophomore year, students at The University have to take a seminar on multiculturalism. I
wanted to access the students’ narratives before these potentially transformative experiences occur.

In order to find study participants and set up interviews, I utilized a multi-step outreach and communication plan. I distributed an email letter through the staff member in charge of the ACHIEVE program to solicit for participation in my study. In this email, potential participants were instructed to contact me directly to inquire further about the study or to sign up to be interviewed. I conducted a phone screening with interested students, where I asked them about each selection criteria to make sure they were a good fit for the study. After conducting phone screenings with 11 students, I was able to sign 9 of them up to be interviewed. All of the interviews took place in a “Group Study Room” in The University library. This space offered a balance of public and private that allowed the participants to feel safe while also providing for a quiet space in which to record interviews.

**Instrumentation and Data Collection**

I conducted in-depth interviews, guided by Seidman’s (2006) recommendations. Seidman (2006) writes, “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). Due to the potential difficulty in getting a sustained commitment out of college freshmen, I condensed Seidman’s three suggested interview sections into one interview. Prior to the start of each participant’s interview, I offered them a blank piece of paper and gave them one minute to write down all of their thoughts in response to the prompt, “I am…” (citation). I drew this writing exercise from Tatum’s (1997) work, “Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race.” Tatum describes using this writing exercise in her own classes:
…a classroom exercise I regularly use with my psychology students reveals a telling pattern. I ask my students to complete the sentence, “I am…,” using as many descriptors as they can think of in sixty seconds. […] Students of color usually mention their racial or ethnic group…White students rarely mention being White. (pp. 20-21)

I used this writing exercise as a primer for students to consider how they define and describe themselves. Furthermore, each student's list of words was included as an artifact in my study (see the Brief Participant Biographies section at the end of this chapter). I was keenly interested to see how many of them listed Asian American, a racial identity category, as part of their response to the "I am…" prompt.

The first segment of each interview was focused on life-history questions. Uncovering early life experiences, family culture, schooling contexts, and community contexts provided me with rich data for my later analysis. The second set of interview questions focused on their present collegiate experience such as what social communities they belong to, their academic major choice, their aspirations for college and after college, and their identity-based experiences in college. Finally, the third segment of interview questions asked participants to reflect on the role of race in American life, whether America is a meritocracy, the pervasiveness of racism today, and other conceptual components that are foundational to color-blind racism. The interview protocol consisted of both primary questions and probes, or sub-questions.

After completing the interviews and having them transcribed, I contacted each participant for a member-checking process. Participants were offered the transcripts of their interview and could validate the accuracy of the transcript. None of my participants offered any revisions or edits to their transcripts.
Data Collection - Confidentiality

I took great lengths to mask the participants’ names and the institutions’ name in my writing to protect confidentiality. I requested permission from the participants ahead of time to record the interviews and make it clear that they did not have to consent to being recorded and could opt out of any and all portions of the study. Data collection occurred through the use of digital recording and the digital files were kept on a password-protected computer. Handwritten field notes were stored in a locked drawer in my office. Both of these data sets will be kept for 36 months after the study completion and then destroyed. I also offered my study participants a chance to select their own pseudonym for the study.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) recommends that data analysis occur simultaneously with data collection. Heeding her recommendation, I examined my transcripts during the interview phase of my research. This resulted in a reflexive, responsive process whereby the collected data served to inform and change my engagement with the study participants and the central research questions. Merriam (2009) recommends allowing the data to narrow or sharpen the investigative process and I followed this recommendation, particularly in my use of probes to solicit further reflection.

I used an inductive-comparative process to sort my data into analytical categories that are linked to my research questions (Merriam, 2009). My first pass over the data, described above, occurred during the data collection process. My second pass over the data, however, occurred after all the interviews had been completed. This second pass did not involve line-by-line open coding, as I used this pass to generate brief biographies for each participant and to establish an intimacy between myself, as the researcher, and the transcripts, as a collection of narratives. In
this second pass, I employed a framework of thematic analysis recommended by Reissman (2008) where the general is emphasized over the local and/or specific. Reissman advises, “Although attending occasionally to particular word choices, thematic analysts generally do not attend to language, form, or interaction. …the primary focus is on ‘what’ is said, rather than “how”…” (p. 59).

In my third pass over the data, I employed a process of open and axial, or analytical, coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Merriam, 2009). This process generated many units of data that I then attempted to group into categories, or themes, using Merriam’s five guidelines for creating inductive categories, in that they should be: responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent. This process of generating codes and categories was informed by the data along with my theoretical grounding in Critical Race Theory. Merriam writes, “…ideological perspectives such as those embodied in feminist theory, critical theory, and postmodernism can be used to interpret life history narratives” (p. 202). As themes appeared, I used a series of computer documents to organize codes according to each emergent category, or theme. This step was important as it allowed me to organically employ Merriam’s five guidelines to create these three inductive themes from my data:

- The Ethnicity Paradigm
- Color-Blind Racism
- Asian American Racial Tropes

Issues of Validity

While qualitative research is empirical, it still represents a break from the positivist paradigm that informs quantitative research. Qualitative research must find ways to address
questions of rigor and accountability if it is going to be regarded as a reliable source of new knowledge. Lincoln and Guba (1986) suggest that qualitative researchers take steps to address the questions of subjectivity, reliability, and authenticity without using a framework of rigor that is tied to a positivistic, quantitative worldview. As an alternative parallel criteria, Lincoln and Guba (1986) offer frameworks of trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness, as a parallel criterion for rigor, works particularly well for my study due to my positioning in relation to my participants as well as my positioning within a broader collective of researchers concerned with my topic matter. Trustworthiness is a broad framework that is centrally concerned with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. My study attempts to support these frameworks by:

**Member Checking:** After collecting data, I offered each study participant a transcript of their interview to allow them to validate the accuracy of the transcript. This is a recreation of Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) recommendation for “continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents” (p. 19). No changes were offered by the participants to be included in the master copy of the transcripts.

**Peer Debriefing:** Lincoln and Guba (1986) recommend working with a “disinterested professional peer” to hold oneself accountable (p. 19). As a scholar-practitioner, I have developed a strong national community of student affairs colleagues that study Asian American identity development. To enhance the trustworthiness of my research, I engaged one of my colleagues throughout the data collection and analysis process as a peer debriefer.

**Thick Descriptive Data:** Lincoln and Guba (1986) urge researchers to share a “…narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or
similarity may be made by others…” (p. 19). I have attempted to commit to this recommendation by including detailed biographical write-ups of each of my study participants in my study findings. I have also provided lengthy direct quotations of my participants’ responses in my findings and discussion chapters, so that each subjects’ narrative is represented in its truest form throughout my analysis.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher who is deeply concerned with social justice and human dignity work, I must stay aware of my own shifting positionality as I conduct my study (Subreenduth & Rhee, 2010). My own subjectivity is a complex latticework of history, culture, theory, identity, and contradiction and this ‘self’ is brought into the research work I do with others, as I was the primary instrument for data collection (Merriam, 2009). My method to gather data was primarily one-on-one interviews with college students, so a second layer to my positionality is my ‘self’ in relation to the subjects of my research. This dyadic interaction does not, however, occur in a vacuum, as I also hold an identity at the institutional level. A third layer to my positionality as a researcher is my self-to-system relationship.

At the heart of my research project is the meaning making process surrounding racial identity for Asian American college students. I approach this work ripe with my own experiences with history, culture, and identity. These aspects of my background cannot be “checked” during the research journey, so it is imperative that I name them and aspire to produce quality research in light, not in spite, of them. My parents are immigrants from India, which makes me a second generation Asian American. I also identify as a person of color and see myself as part of a broader coalition of individuals and groups working for racial justice. My sister and I were born when my father was in graduate school and my mother was still learning
English. We did not grow up economically wealthy, but I am also keenly aware that we grew up with immense intellectual and social capital privilege due to our father being a university professor.

My ‘self’ in relation to the subjects in my study brings other positionality issues into account. I interviewed first-year college students of color at the institution where I hold a directorship of an office that supports these students. In my one-to-one interview work, I had to remain cognizant that I could be perceived as upper-middle class, based on how I dress for work, my speech-patterns and diction, and my non-verbal mannerisms. I met with interview participants outside of my physical office, but I was still dressed in a way that established social distance between me and the students in my study. One aspect of my own racial identity that may have impacted this process is me being visibly identifiable as a person of Indian descent. This may have had an effect on the study participants, as they may or may not have seen me as an “insider” when it comes to conversations on race, due to the immense heterogeneity of the Asian American community.

Finally, my institutional positioning as the director of a student affairs department at The University has an effect on my research. Students might have felt awkward talking about their stories if they thought that I was judging them as the director of a student affairs office. It was centrally important for me to establish a conversational, relationship-focused interview format so they could see me as not only the director, but also as a person of color who has lived through his own racial meaning making process. Conversely, working for The University for the last seven years gave me an intimate connection with the student experience that I was able to leverage to build a relationship with the students I interviewed. I have worked closely with many students of
color as they move through their first year at The University and can empathize with the challenges they might be facing.

**Methodological Limitations of this Study**

One of the central limitations of this study was the sample size of nine participants. This is not inherently problematic in a qualitative study, but this sample size offers challenges due to the intense heterogeneity of the Asian American community. Asian American is a panethnic, racial label for dozens of specific Asian ethnic groups and the nine participants in this study in no way represent the entirety of this critical diversity. Conversely, the dense concentration of Filipinos and South Asian participants in this study might offer valuable data to the broader literature on Asian Americans because these two groups are understudied within this body of scholarship (Accapadi, 2012).

Another limitation of this study is the geographic position of the research site, in the American Midwest. Asian American communities in the Midwest are much newer than Asian American communities on the west coast. Out of my nine participants, eight were second generation Americans and most lived in communities where Asian Americans were in scarce in numbers. These generational and critical mass dynamics have an impact on young adults’ racial meaning-making process and a similar study conducted in Southern California might reveal very different findings.

Finally, since this is a single-site study, some of the specific characteristics of The University might serve as limitations to the applicability of these findings to other educational settings. The University is an urban, commuter institution, with only 10% of the total student body living in on-campus housing. The University has fraternity and sorority life, but the
participation numbers are very low (approximately 6%) compared to many other institutions. Also, there are no fraternity or sorority houses. Furthermore, The University is known within its geographic market for its commitment to diversity and safe campus climate and this emerged in many of the participants’ reasons for attending this institution. All of these factors might add up to Asian American students at The University experiencing race differently during their freshman year than at campuses that are primarily residential, have a Greek-dominated party scene, or that have a more parochial campus climate.

In Chou and Feagin’s (2010) study of Asian Americans experiences with racism, many of the college students in their study reported dealing with overt hostility and racial aggression on their college campuses, either in the residence halls, at house parties, or even while walking through the quad. While all of my study participants had experiences with racism prior to attending college, none of them shared any experiences with overt racial hostility or campus-based racial micro-aggressions in college so far. The data collection for this study occurred during the beginning of the winter quarter, so participants had finished one quarter of their first year of college. This unique combination of local factors at The University might impact the racial meaning-making processes of these study subjects due to the relationship between personal experiences with racism and the formation of a strong racial identity.

**Brief Participant Biographies**

Victoria grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. She went to Catholic school from kindergarten to 10th grade and then switched to a public school for her last two years of high school after having a bad experience with her basketball coach. Her grandparents immigrated to the United States and she is a third-generation American. Her parents are divorced and she grew
up in a predominantly White neighborhood with the largest non-White group identifying as Chaldean. She identifies ethnically as Filipina and racially as Filipina.

Guy grew up in the city of Chicago, Illinois. He went to public school from kindergarten through high school. His parents immigrated from Vietnam, bringing his grandparents with them. His parents are divorced and Guy grew up with his mom, grandparents, and several other family members. For the early part of his childhood, Guy lived in the Southeast Asian enclave community in the city’s north side Argyle neighborhood. Partway through elementary school, his family moved to a northwest side neighborhood that was both racially and socioeconomically diverse. He identifies ethnically as Vietnamese-Chinese and racially as Vietnamese-Chinese.

Sarah grew up in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. She went to public school from kindergarten through high school. Her parents are immigrants from India and have been divorced since she was a small child. Sarah struggled with depression beginning in middle school and throughout high school. Now, as a college student, she works full-time at a restaurant as a waitress while taking a full load of classes. She identifies ethnically as Indian and racially as Indian.

Lina grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin. She went to Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. Her parents immigrated from the Philippines and she was born in the United States. She was raised in a predominantly White, middle class neighborhood. She identifies ethnically as Filipina and racially as Asian American.

Kelly grew up in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois. She went to public school from kindergarten through high school and attended a Muslim school on Sundays. Her parents immigrated from India and she was born in the United States. Her grandmother lived with her
family occasionally throughout her childhood. She describes her neighborhood as socioeconomically and racially diverse. Kelly identifies ethnically as Indian and racially as Indian.

Natasha grew up in the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland. She went to public school from kindergarten through high school. Her parents, grandparents, and siblings all immigrated from the Philippines when she was three. She describes her family as lower class due to her father’s job loss and her parents’ poor financial planning. Natasha identifies ethnically as Filipina and racially as Asian.

Ramjam grew up in the city of Chicago, Illinois until age 10, when his family moved to an inner-ring suburb. He went to public schools from kindergarten through high school. His parents immigrated from Pakistan and he was born in the United States. He describes his family as working class to middle class, as his dad drives a taxi cab and his mom just started working as a sales associate at a department store. Ramjam identifies ethnically as Pakistani and racially as Muslim.

Don grew up in the city of Chicago, Illinois, in the northwest side South Asian enclave neighborhood. He went to public schools from kindergarten through high school. His parents immigrated from Indian and he was born in the United States. He describes his family as working class, as his father works at a Dunkin’ Donuts and his mom works at a factory. Don identifies ethnically as Indian and racially as Indian.

Charlotte grew up in an outer-ring, northern suburb of Chicago, Illinois. She went to public school from kindergarten through high school. Her parents immigrated from the Phillipinnes with her grandmother and she was born in the United States. She describes her
family as upper-middle class and her suburban community as highly diverse. Charlotte identifies ethnically as Filipino American and racially as Asian.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed my methodology and method for conducting my research study. In the subsequent three chapters, Chapters 4-6, I will present my research findings, organized into three themes. Finally, in Chapter 7, I will discuss my findings as they relate to my research questions, analyze the implications of this research for the relevant bodies of scholarship, and offer implications for research and practice as a result of this dissertation study.
CHAPTER 4 – THEME 1: THE ETHNICITY PARADIGM

Introduction

Using a socio-historical model to examine the relationship between racial formation and the hegemonic state, Omi and Winant (1994) argue that, “The dominant paradigm of race for the last half-century has been that of ethnicity” (p. 12). They explain that an ethnicity theory of race emerged in the early part of the 20th century as a Progressive Era response to biologicist, fixed notions of race that were deeply racist. Scholars such as Horace Kallen and Robert Park offered a contrasting formulation of race that explained identity through the frameworks of culture and descent. Omi and Winant (1994) offer the following definitions for these two key terms in the ethnicity paradigm:

“Culture” in this formulation included such diverse factors as religion, language, customs,” nationality, and political identification. “Descent” involved heredity and a sense of group origins, thus suggesting that ethnicity was socially “primordial,” if not biologically given, in character. (p. 15)

By rooting a notion of identity in social factors such as culture and descent, scholars of the ethnicity paradigm hoped to counter racist formulations of identity that offered fixed, biological explanations for various racial problems in American society at that time.

The key problems in the ethnicity paradigm of race emerge from how Progressive Era scholars sought to understand racial identity in the first place: by observing European ethnic groups in their movement from being new, excluded ethnic minorities to gradually being included as White Americans. The early version of the ethnicity model centralized this process
of assimilation as normative and desirable in its core foundations as it sought to position racial identity as simply a group trait that could either help or hinder a group’s inevitable march towards becoming “fully American.” By the middle of the 20th century, a new group of scholars began arguing for a cultural pluralist version of the ethnicity paradigm that asserted a group’s ability to maintain their culture while also adopting an American identity (Omi & Winant, 1994). Both the assimilationist and cultural pluralist paradigms, however, suffer from key issues when trying to explain racial experiences of non-White groups by using a framework built on a White, European norm.

First and foremost, the ethnicity paradigm struggles to explain racialized experiences of people of color because it tends to focus on the ethnic group itself, at the expense of any analysis of state power and structural racism. The ethnicity paradigm, according to Omi and Winant, subtly blames the victim by positioning identity as something the group simply possesses upon arrival. The paradigm suggests that groups bring racial identity with them that either helps or hinders their ability to succeed in American society. By this logic of culture and descent, different achievement patterns amongst racialized groups can be explained by arguing that some groups arrive with a “culture of success” while others may not, thereby eliding the hegemonic role of the state in manufacturing racial projects and structural racism. Omi and Winant’s (1994) final critique of the ethnicity paradigm is that it collapses race and ethnicity in deeply problematic ways by treating racial groups, like Blacks or Asian Americans, as ethnic groups. This obscures very real ethnic diversity within these racial groups and muddies the analysis by confusing ethnic experiences with racial formations.

The ethnicity paradigm is one of my major thematic findings in this research study. My participants relied heavily on the tools of the ethnicity paradigm, such as culture and descent, to
try and describe and explain their racial experiences. Furthermore, they drew extensively from the broader liberal frameworks of assimilationism and cultural pluralism in their values and opinions on American society. In the next section of this chapter, I will share my significant findings before a brief conclusion.

**Culture and Descent**

One of the most literal appearances of the ethnicity paradigm in my participants’ narratives was in response to the question, “How do you identify racially?” I asked this question of every participant and received ethnic identities as answers in eight of nine cases. Here are some representative examples:

1. **Vijay:** Um, so how do you identify your race?
   
   **Charlotte:** My race, Asian I believe. I mean sometimes there’s question about like is the Philippines considered an Asian country or is it like Pacific Islander? But I’m, I say it’s Asian.

2. **Vijay:** How about racially? How do you identify racially?
   
   **Don:** As an Indian.

3. **Vijay:** And um, how about if I asked you to identify your race, how do you identify racially?
   
   **Guy:** Um, yeah, the Chinese is in me, so yeah. Um, yeah, most, yeah, just Chinese and Vietnamese.

4. **Vijay:** Umm, how do you identify racially?
   
   **Ramjam:** Uh, racially I would say I am Muslim. Is that the right type of answer?
Vijay: Uh, it’s whatever answer comes to mind. Like if somebody, if you had a friend and they said what’s your race, would you say Muslim?

Ramjam: Pakistani, Muslim, yeah.

My participants’ answers represent a broad cross section of the culture and descent logic of the ethnicity paradigm. Answers like Asian or Chinese and Vietnamese use national origin in place of race while responses like Muslim use cultural frameworks of religion in place of race. What is particularly striking is the context in which these interviews were set up and conducted. During the outreach process for participant solicitation, all of my potential participants received an email that indicated that this study was a study of Asian American racial identity. Subsequently, when participants came for their interviews, they had to sign an informed consent document that restated the research as being about Asian American racial identity. In these ways, my subjects were primed with racial language and still did not answer the question of racial identification with the language of race.

Out of nine participants, only one person identified racially as Asian American. Lina wrote the words “Asian American” down on her Brainstorm Sheet and she also answered the race question with the words Asian American. However, when she expanded on how she was using the term, it became clear that the ethnicity paradigm was still at work in this seemingly exceptional case.

Vijay: Sure, well that’s great. Now, how about if I were to ask you about your race? How do you identify racially?
**Lina**: Umm, I identify myself as Asian American because there was some misunderstanding a while back with my exchange student friends or just one of them, and, umm, it helped me realize that ... because sometimes, umm, like I can’t be fully Filipino, like a native; yet, I can’t be like a full American quite ... Even though I was born and raised here, I can’t be a full American to me.

Lina appears to be framing her identification as Asian American using the tools of culture and descent. She identifies both as Asian and as American while also being neither simply Asian nor American. This framework employs a liminal cultural positioning that is part of the ethnicity paradigm’s focus on constructing identity as something the ethnic subject carries. Lina carries with her an Asian cultural experience, due to her heritage. She also explains that she was born in America, but feels that she cannot be fully American.

It is important to clarify that Lina’s second statement, that she did not feel fully American, is not linked to a racial awareness of White hegemonic racism. Later in my interview with Lina, I asked her to share more about the “misunderstanding” she experienced with this exchange student that resulted in her beginning to identify as Asian American. She told me that her high school had a large exchange program with other high schools from all over the world and she had many friends from the exchange student community. One of her friends was a White exchange student from Europe and, in her junior year, accused her of trying to pass as a foreigner. When she asked him what he meant, he explained that he thought she always focused on her Asian Filipina identity, while downplaying her American identity.

**Lina**: ... I guess I was saying how I was half, half foreign I think it was, and I guess he didn’t really like that. Although, in a sense it’s kind of true because, umm, I’m not like
white I guess, which is what, umm, I guess America was kind of based off of in a sense. And, umm, so he was like asking me these questions. Even though I was being honest with him, he was like keep on asking me, umm, if like I knew the language or whatever, and then I said no; and then he’s like, well, you can’t be foreign then in a sense.

Lina began identifying as Asian American after a White European exchange student challenged her identification as Asian. His perception of her American identity was based off of essentialized, cultural identity models that equate race with language and nationality. Lina was also using a cultural framework for identification that led her, at that time, to identify as Asian. What emerged as a result of this troubling exchange was an *ethnic identification* of Asian American lodged firmly in the ethnicity paradigm.

During the interview, I did notice that Lina used the phrase, “I’m not like white I guess, which is what, umm, I guess America was kind of based off of in a sense.” I was curious as to the meaning behind this statement so, a few minutes later in the interview, I attempted to probe more deeply into how she makes meaning from the different racial micro and macroaggressions she experienced in high school.

**Vijay:** Well, let me drill down a little bit more specifically. Do you remember ... So when the teachers would mistake you for the exchange students every year - and you said at first it was very irritating and then you sort of got used to it and made it into humorous, umm, but the irritation never went away if I remember how you phrased it - did experiencing that every year, that case of mistaken identity, umm, did that teach you anything about your racial identity? Did having those experiences teach you anything about your racial identity?
Lina: Well, again it showed me, umm, how I was different; yet, umm, it was weird as like I look as different as the exchange students who went in, who came in to school, which was interesting. And it also helped me realize that, umm, like Americans aren’t just one race. It’s many races. And so, it helped me realize that some people, as I said before, are just ignorant and that, umm, there’s more to Americans than just white. It’s, umm, like people who came here like long ago, umm, from like everywhere, Asia, Africa and, umm, in a sense, umm, you know the country itself, umm, unites all of us.

Lina’s conclusion that the “country itself” unites the many peoples who inhabit it is a powerful capture of the cultural pluralist logic in the ethnicity paradigm. Lina’s identification as Asian American led me to probe deeply throughout her interview in an attempt to better understand how she understood race, state power, and her own social location. While there were moments where she almost appeared to be naming hegemony or Whiteness, her conclusions were firmly rooted in the frameworks of culture and descent that guided every participant in this study.

Melting Pots and Salad Bowls

In my interview with Charlotte, it became clear that people frequently asked her the question, “What are you?” As we discussed this phenomenon, I attempted to probe and explore how she made meaning of these frequent occurrences. In her explanation she used the terms “predominantly White” and “dominating White,” which I asked her to tell me more about.

Vijay: Hmm, tell me about that distinction, the difference between predominately white versus dominating white.

Charlotte: Um, dominating white being like everyone is white. Like, everyone um you know left their culture at home and joined into the American culture today. Um, that, or
yeah that’s dominantly white. And then predominantly white is like um, like what we have now. So there are some people who still are very... have their cultures from the country they came from very strong, or is very strong in the United States. Um, whereas some people have kind of just like meshed more into what like have settled with just being white. Um, for example like I have some friends, I’ll be like, “Oh yeah, I’m proud to say I’m 100 Filipino.” And then for them they’ll be like, yeah I’m Swedish, German, Irish, et cetera, and I’ll be like, okay. I mean some of them are proud, like my boyfriend, for example, he’s Swedish. He’s mostly Swedish, um, but like he doesn’t even know you know what the rest of him is. Which it doesn’t really bother me. I’m just like, interesting. So, I kind of think like who do they identify with if I identify with being Filipino? Does that make sense?

I found this section of Charlotte’s narrative to be a particularly fascinating capture of the logic and language of cultural pluralism. When Charlotte used the terms “dominating White” and “predominantly White” in a sentence, I asked her to share more about what these words mean to her. Charlotte covered a lot of ground in her brief answer, sharing that she perceived the United States to be a place where people can make ethnic choices. “Dominating White,” in her parlance, would be a system of forced assimilation, whereas Charlotte described her view of contemporary American society as a place where people can either choose to adhere to their ethnic culture 100% or they can “settle with just being white.” Charlotte’s framing of racial identity as being choice-based, individual, and unconnected to systemic racism (one can simply choose to become White) was one of the most glaring examples of the salience of the ethnicity paradigm for my participants.
Other participants also shared cultural pluralist sentiments when attempting to describe present day American society.

**Vijay:** Huh, interesting. Um, do you think that racial identity is an important part of life today in America?

**Kelly:** I think so. I mean the whole country was kind of based off of having a bunch of different races put together, so people having their own racial identity is kind of what makes up America because everyone brings their culture into this one place where people can kind of experience everyone else’s nationality and culture as well.

**Vijay:** Oh, so, so race is important in American lives today because racial diversity is important in American life?

**Kelly:** Yeah, I mean it’s what made it, so I feel like it’s important to America.

Kelly’s conclusion that “…it’s what made it…” seems to be a reference to America being a “nation of immigrants,” a popular pluralist framework for describing America’s past and present. Kelly’s “nation of immigrants” sentiments appeared frequently throughout my participants’ reflections. One clear exception appeared during Sarah’s interview, when she seemed to adopt a more assimilationist ethnic framework in her description of her parents.

**Sarah:** Umm, my dad’s pretty Indian, like he’s just really, he’s really like full of culture and he’s like super attached to India and he like wants to go home there, and he’s always like, I don’t know, he’s just very Indian is the only way I can describe him. And my mom, she um,… I don’t know, I love her, but I don’t really think she has good character.
I think she’s kind of status obsessed, and I think she’s just kind of really like obsessed with money and… Yeah, that’s the only way I think of her. [Giggle]

**Vijay**: Is she ...

**Sarah**: She’s really nice and loving though, like both my parents are.

**Vijay**: Okay. And is ... And are your parents together?

**Sarah**: Uh, no, they’re divorced.

**Vijay**: They’re divorced, okay. Umm is your mom, uh, more Indian than your dad or less Indian than your dad?

**Sarah**: She’s one of those types who tries to like break away from the crowd and blend in like with Americans.

**Vijay**: Okay.

**Sarah**: And my dad’s just more just like really proud of his heritage.

Sarah appears to be directly using the ethnicity paradigm to talk about her parents in this exchange, except that she seems to employ the more antiquated assimilationist framework, rather than the more contemporary cultural pluralist framework, in her analysis. Sarah describes her dad as “very Indian” and her mom as trying to “…break away from the crowd and blend in like with Americans.” In this thinking, categories such as Indian and American exist as discreet entities and immigrants must make choices about where they want to stake their identity claim. Sarah offers that her father is proud of his heritage, which fits well in an assimilationist model where immigrants can either remain in their community of ethnic descent or they can be proud to
be American. In the assimilationist framework, these are constructed as exclusive choices. This interpretation of the ethnicity paradigm rarely appeared in my participants’ narratives, but I think it is important to acknowledge that assimilationist thinking still exists and has not been entirely lost in the shift to the more popular cultural pluralist model.

**The Diversity Panacea**

The cultural pluralist interpretation of the ethnicity paradigm maintains several core assumptions of liberal multiculturalism, one of which is the explicit value of diversity. From a liberal multiculturalist framework, diversity itself is offered as a goal and the politics of inclusion often trump the politics of equity (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Diversity is lauded in this paradigm because of the cultural pluralist assumption that interaction with difference results in increased tolerance and acceptance of difference. Taken in concert with the liberal multicultural construction of racism as individual ignorance, the logic of cultural pluralism positions diversity as a curative to racism. Diversity, in this logic, allows racist individuals the chance to interact with those different than themselves and, as a result, their ignorance will be dispelled. As problematic as this thinking is, it was a prevalent finding across many of my participants’ stories.

**Vijay:** Hmm. Did uh…. Did you ever experience any racism, identity based racism in uh, in high school?

**Natasha:** No, my school was pretty diverse.

An interesting manifestation of the “diversity matters” phenomenon was the frequency at which my participants implied that non-diverse communities are racist, simply because they are not diverse. A glaring example of this appears in the exchange above, where Natasha very off-handedly explains that she did not experience any racism in high school using the logic that her
school was “very diverse” and, therefore, racism could not occur in such a space. In the following example, Lina shares how her high school teachers repeatedly mistook her for a foreign exchange student. I was deeply curious as to the meaning Lina and her family made of these events.

Lina: And, umm, and then one day I asked her a question in class like during work time, and then she told me, “Wow, your English is really good,” and I’m like, “Oh, umm, I was born here.” And so it was kind of funny how it kind of made me laugh and it kind of annoyed me at the same time. But at the same time, umm, I became friends with many of the exchange students because it was pretty much like the only diversity in school. So, umm, with that like it made me embrace my culture and, umm, learn about their cultures too, so I’m really grateful for that. And, umm, I still keep in touch with all of them too, so that’s really good.

Vijay: So when you would bring that news home and tell your parents, what did your parents say to you?

Lina: Umm, well they thought it was kind of funny, but then at the same time they know that, umm, they know where we live so, umm, we started in a sense kind of accepting it.

Vijay: Just as a byproduct of being in Green Bay, Wisconsin?

Lina: Yeah.

For Lina and her parents, the repeated racial microaggressions Lina faced at school could be explained away as a result of living in a non-diverse community. This explanation locates all of the agency in racism at the individual level, obscuring the important role of structure, power, and
the state in producing and maintaining racial projects. The unspoken segment of this diversity equation is that if Green Bay suddenly became more diverse, the incidents of racism would disappear. In another interview, one of my subjects, Guy, uses this same logic, but in a different way.

Vijay: Do you think race is a factor in American society today?

Guy: Definitely.

Vijay: How so?

Guy: Um, aside from interactions at school, it has an effect on what their school admissions, um….

Vijay: Like college admissions?

Guy: Yeah.

Vijay: Okay.

Guy: With my case and my friend’s case. Um, I guess, yeah with interactions I guess there are racists in the American society. There are the, you know um like that West Baptist Church group.

Vijay: What about the West Baptist Church?

Guy: First off they’re racists, and they’re also um I guess very anti-society in away…

Vijay: What about, uh you mentioned that they’re racists, how do you know they’re racists?
Guy: Their, I think their group is mostly Caucasians, so I, I was just basing on assumptions that they’re racists.

In this exchange, Guy is attempting to answer a question about whether race matters in today’s society. After first mentioning college admissions, he then goes on to name West Baptist Church (sic) as racist. When questioned about how he knows they are racist, he offers a highly reductive version of the diversity logic: they must be racist because they are not diverse. This is a striking example of the power of the diversity logic because, in this case, there is ample evidence that the Westboro Baptist Church is racist in their rhetoric and public displays of bigotry. Rather than reference any of this, Guy focuses on the lack of diversity in the Westboro followers. This seems to be clear evidence of the cultural pluralist emphasis on numerical diversity rather than outcome-focused equity.

From schools, to geographic regions, to church organizations, my participants seemed to believe that a lack of diversity could explain the prevalence of racism. The celebration of diversity, and condemnation of non-diverse spaces, was not limited to predominantly White spaces. Several of my participants employed the diversity analysis to problematize ethnic enclaves and ethnic identity groups because they too are “not diverse.” I asked one of my participants, Sarah, if she thought that racism existed anymore and she shared the following.

Sarah: Umm, yeah, I think it always will with certain people. It’s just kind of, you know, some people are just never going to change.

Vijay: How come?

Sarah: Umm, maybe because of like their surroundings. Like my stepbrothers in Virginia are really, really racist, and I feel like it’s just because like they grew up in the
south and a lot of people there still have that mentality in the south; so, umm, yeah, I think it’s just kind of like where you grew up. Like most like, umm, black people that grow up in just really close black communities where they’re only surrounded by their kind, I feel like they’re always just kind of, they feel like they have a huge like gap between other white people sometimes. Like I don’t know, I see it in Chicago and there are just like only like still like there are so many middle schools that I see coming out and it’s just all black kids; and like I feel like it’s ... I don’t know, because of that like how like we’re still kind of separated in a way, it will still exist with people.

Sarah begins her response by saying that racism still exists because some people will never change. When questioned further, however, she shifts her explanation of the cause of persistent racism from individuals to segregated areas, like Virginia. After explaining that her stepbrothers are really racist and that this is due to a Southern mentality, she fluidly moves into several statements problematizing urban Black communities. While she doesn’t explicitly state that these communities are also racist due to their lack of diversity, she does seem to apply the same analysis to urban, Black enclaves that she employed to name her stepbrothers, Virginia, and the South as racist.

In a similar inversion of the diversity logic, one of my participants, Victoria, seemed to explain her that own dissonance with the Filipino community was linked to their emphasis on socializing with other Filipinos.

Victoria: But I don’t know why, but I think it was just I had been involved in the group of like Filipino like, it was like basketball and like associations with like church and stuff, Filipino church, but I never really like cliqued with like the other Filipinos too much.
Like I grew up with them so I knew them and like I guess we were friends, but I wouldn’t consider them close to me or anything. Umm, maybe when we were little and I don’t ... Yeah, probably just when we were little we were closer, but the ideals that some of the Filipinos at home had in that group were very different from the ones that I saw, so I guess we never really saw eye to eye, and there was just ... I like to stick to my instinct a lot, and there was always something like weird, like something off. And as I’m coming to grow up more, it’s because they’re more, they cut themselves off. They like to separate themselves and be their own clique, I guess, and I’m ... and it’s like an exclusive one, and I was never one for that exclusive stuff. Like anyone can come out with me, but you guys can go do your thing together by yourselves and I’ll just go out with a big cluster of different people that are every race, every personality you could possibly imagine, just people I liked hanging out with instead of just a group of people based out of, based out of your ethnicity, I guess, so yeah.

Victoria seems to be critiquing the Filipinos she knows by stating that they want to hang out with other Filipinos. In a cultural pluralist model, this cannot be understood as a positive because the enclave community would be both not-diverse in its internal makeup and cut off from pluralist interaction that is linked to social progress. It appears that Victoria is employing this logic in the way she frames the Filipino choice to associate with other Filipinos as “weird” and “off.” She also proceeds from this critique to herald her own inclusivity and preference for difference as a clear positive when compared to people who choose to associate with, “...a group of people...based out of your ethnicity.”

A final notable mention of the diversity logic that appeared in three of my participants’ narratives is the connection between diversity and school choice. Since all of my participants
were in their first year of college, the college selection process was still fresh in their minds. The following excerpt from my interview with Natasha is representative of the value three of my participants placed on attending a “diverse” institution.

**Natasha:** …And I did actually apply because of race, because I saw The University was diverse. When I went to the other schools there were only white people, like literally. There were two other Asian kids in like a room of 500 kids during like the open house. And then the other school too also had like a couple Asian kids. And I did notice those things. I just like I wanted to go to a school where I felt welcomed almost…

The extreme value placed on numerical diversity seemed to be connected to the assumption that having lots of different people together will result in a better experience. In the case of one of my participants, Guy, this logic was present even when explaining why he was not admitted to a selective enrollment high school, even though he had the grades and test scores to get in.

**Guy:** So, yeah, there’s not many Hispanics or blacks. It’s mostly just Asians and whites. Um, I don’t know the like ratio of the ethnicity over at [a selective enrollment high school], but I’m pretty sure it has to do with like your, your ethnic or your race, and it affects your chance of getting in. Because I mean, in a way it makes sense, you don’t want a uh, like a school to be just mainly you know one race, you want to have a diversified race.

In the context of telling his story, Guy explained that although he had good grades and test scores, he believed he wasn’t admitted to his top choice high school due to the overabundance of Asian Americans at that school already. In the passage above, Guy seems okay with this
outcome because he supports the greater societal commitment to numerical diversity over more nuanced admissions processes rooted in equitable outcomes.

**Clubs, Fairs, and Festivals**

Natasha, Ramjam, and Victoria spoke at length about the important role of ethnicity-themed clubs and festivals in their high school experiences. My findings seem to indicate that these pivotal points of engagement engendered some positive forms of identification while also reifying the problematics of the ethnicity paradigm from a race and power perspective. The following exchanges capture the various ways that my participants made meaning of their engagement in ethnic-affinity organizations and events. The ethnicity paradigm is at work throughout their stories, producing liberal cultural pluralism while also obscuring the role of the state in perpetuating racism and inequity.

**Vijay:** So, so if they pride themselves on their diversity, why doesn’t the curriculum in the high school have any, like have information about the Asian American experience?

**Natasha:** I don’t think people care. Like they, they do do things. They do like have like, they have the Heritage Night for a reason, and they have like all these like…. They have just a lot of things to like show your culture, like they have different clubs that are like you know like the African American Club, like things like to like talk about those things.

In the passage above, I am attempting to probe more deeply into Natasha’s reflections on the lack of Asian American content in her high school curriculum. She had framed her high school as being very diverse and valuing diversity earlier in the interview and I was curious to see how she connected these convictions to the glaring absence of Asian American history, literature, or art in the classes she took. Natasha offered an explanation that centered on her high
school’s “Heritage Night” program as proof that the institution cared about diversity and inclusion. I was surprised at the frequency with which these types of festivals or fairs appeared in my participants’ narratives and the role these events played in their adoption of the ethnicity paradigm. Natasha also mentions that her high school allowed the students to have identity-based clubs “…like the African American Club…” as evidence of her school’s commitment to multiculturalism. These ethnic student organizations also appeared frequently in my interviews and seemed to serve the same purpose, to acculturate students in the ethnicity paradigm.

**Vijay:** Umm, did your own sense of who you were racially, did your racial identity, umm, change at all over the course of high school because of these shifting demographics?

**Ramjam:** Uh, my identity as a Muslim, I would say I got more comfortable with being a Muslim in society around African-American kids and like the Caucasian kids as well or just being a diverse community in general because like as I got older I was taking classes outside of school, which is like my kind of church school.

**Vijay:** Okay.

**Ramjam:** And they taught us to be more comfortable with yourself and being a Muslim in today’s society, and so like with that being a factor in school, I was more like comfortable around the students, like I was growing up with and like I got more involved in like more like cultural stuff with school as well.

**Vijay:** Like what, what cultural stuff?
Ramjam: There’s a club called Indo-Pak Club. We’re like obviously the Indian and the Pakistani Club, and like not only like was it only ... it wasn’t limited to Indians and Pakistanis. Like we, I mean, accepted obviously like the Asians and like Latinos, African Americans. And like that club had like a main event every year, which was called Indo-Pak Night, and so like it could be like a pretty much a show for like an audience, and like [a suburban high school] and [a rival suburban high school] would combine clubs for that one night to like, you know, put on dance performances, a fashion show, kind of like the fashion show that we have at The University.

In this exchange, Ramjam is describing his own maturation process and cultural development from middle school to high school. He describes becoming comfortable enough with his ethnic identities to join the Indo-Pak club at his high school and, later in the interview, he also shared that he had joined an analogous student organization upon entering college. While Natasha appeared to use the existence of her high school’s ethnic student organizations as a marker of their diversity commitment, Ramjam shared that his participation in these organizations enhanced his own ethnic identity development. These two stories demonstrate the power of ethnic clubs, fairs, and festivals in schools settings. Whether students participate, like Ramjam, or simply observe, like Natasha, the ethnicity paradigm functions as a key acculturation model in producing ethnic salience. It is interesting to note that Ramjam felt the need to state that the Indo-Pak club at his high school was “…not just limited to Indians and Pakistanies…” and that other students of color could join. To me, this statement represents a central anxiety in cultural pluralism: identity-based organizations are valuable but exclusivity is not permissible, as it interferes with the greater goal of diversity.
A striking example of the role of clubs and fairs in producing ethnic paradigm-thinking emerged from my interview with Victoria. In the following lengthy exchange, Victoria mentions her high school’s “Ethnic Bazaar” event as being pivotal in her identity development and ideological formation.

**Victoria:** Yeah, for high school. And she was, umm, she was Filipino and then there ... It was a smaller group. Umm, it was a small group of like the Asian clan. But, umm, at my first high school at the all-girls school, there was this thing called Ethnic Bazaar where people showed off their ethnicity. It was like one of the best things that could have possibly happened because then I realized that it doesn’t matter that I’m Filipino. There’s other, there’s other races and they’re proud too, and it would be a shame to hide it, I guess. And so we got to do our little ethnic traditional dance, and everyone thought it was cool. I just never thought of it like that when we were younger that everyone, all of the whites and the Chaldeans, they all know each other’s traditions and they generally have the same traditions; and then when something else comes along, it could actually be cool that you don’t fit the mold. …So when I got into high school, I quickly got into that group because I had ... there was a senior and I had played basketball with her for the Filipino basketball league, so I knew her before I came in, and she had put together this group of Filipinos to do this dance; and I absolutely, I absolutely loved the experience because I didn’t… I felt like I didn’t have to be embarrassed by it anymore.

**Vijay:** That’s great.

**Victoria:** It was ... That’s the one thing I missed when I transferred. It was that Ethnic Bazaar that you got to see blacks perform their traditional like from the African dances to
like the modern like step, and then there’s the Irish dancers and there were, I think there were like three different Indian dances too; and then people would recite poetry about race and stuff and fully embrace the racial identity that was in that high school considering it was Catholic but they accepted everybody. And I had a couple friends that were like Muslim in school, and that was cool because going to an all Catholic school you would think everyone’s Catholic, everyone goes to church together, everyone celebrates the same holidays; but it was cool that there were girls that simply chose it because they liked it, the atmosphere or the education, whatever it was.

A few minutes later in the interview, the “Ethnic Bazaar” reappeared in Victoria’s narrative after she mentioned getting asked, “What are you?” frequently.

**Vijay**: Well, let me ask you. Why do you think people are coming up to you, walking up to you and saying, “What are you?”

**Victoria**: I think they’re curious because I’ve been told that I look mixed, mixed between different ethnicities, and they find it interesting to find out … I think it calms the curiosity just … I’d rather you just come up and ask it than just stare or like …

[Laughter]

**Victoria**: Like I don’t feel awkward about it anymore. I just kind of… it’s kind of like a game to me now. Like I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but I think that’s just my personality that it’s just, it’s just interesting to see how people view me… or as like they’re actually seeing, they’re seeing some sort of similarity to some different race. And to me that’s just like proving that we’re all just the same. We’re all the same. We all have the same ... We all have two eyes and a nose and 10 fingers, maybe a couple more if
you’re one of those lucky ones. And so, I’ve accepted it a lot easier after high school after that Ethnic Bazaar because I understand that it’s… you are curious when you meet someone what ethnicity they are. Even if they are white, like are you Polish? Are you Irish? Are you German, English? And I think it’s just human nature to be curious about what… someone’s background.

The Ethnic Bazaar seems to play two roles in Victoria’s narrative. Upon entering high school, she reported feeling awkward and ashamed of her Filipina identity and the fact that she was a racial minority in her community. Attending and participating in the Ethnic Bazaar seemed to have given Victoria a sense of pride and comfort with her racial difference. While, on the surface, this seems positive, it is important to note that Victoria’s newfound comfort came from the following ethnicity paradigm logic: “…it doesn’t matter than I’m Filipino. …There’s other races and they’re proud too.” This framework of cultural pluralism positions her racial identity as an ethnic identity and part of the broader multicultural milieu of American life. The “embrace ethnicity because everyone’s got one” ideology of liberal multiculturalism hides the central role of the state and structural racism in producing race, racism, and inequity. The impact of this obfuscation becomes clear in the second part of the interview passage, when I asked Victoria to explain why people frequently ask her, “What are you?” In the ethnicity paradigm, Victoria’s explanation of simple curiosity is perfectly reasonable. After all, as she puts it, “We’re all the same…” so a profoundly Asian American racial experience becomes understood as innocuous, individuated interaction.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored one of my emergent themes, the ethnicity paradigm, by analyzing four key findings that support the theme: culture and descent; melting pots and salad
bowls; the diversity panacea; and clubs, fairs, and festivals. Taken as a whole, these four findings seem to demonstrate that the ethnicity paradigm informs the way my participants think of their racial identities. The ethnicity paradigm appears to supplant racial identification with ethnic identification. This was evident in my participants’ focus on individual experiences over collective racial experiences. The role of the state in producing hegemonic Whiteness along with structural racism was also noticeably absent from the narratives I collected, which can be attributed to the ethnicity paradigm’s epistemic blind spot in matters of state power. Finally, the central role of liberal multiculturalism as a framework for understanding difference seems intimately connected to the ethnicity paradigm. My participants placed enormous value on numerical diversity, heritage celebration, and cultural pluralism as a result of their adherence to the ethnicity paradigm. These key tenets of liberal multiculturalism offered my participants an “ethnic toolkit” to use in their meaning making process while also leaving them woefully short on race-conscious analytical schemas. I will discuss the implications of these findings, in light of my research questions, in Chapter 8 of this dissertation. In the following chapter, I will explore the presence of color-blind and post racial ideologies in my participants’ narratives.
CHAPTER 5 – THEME 2: COLOR-BLIND RACISM

Introduction

In this chapter, I will share the most important findings for one of my major themes, color-blind racism. According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), “Color-blind racism emerged as a new racial ideology in the late 1960s, concomitantly with the crystallization of the ‘new racism’ as America’s new racial structure” (p. 16). With the collapse of the Jim Crow state, the “new racism” of Bonilla-Silva’s analysis was more covert and underground, yet just as effective in maintaining White hegemony. Scholars of color-blind racism write that White people began to employ a logic of “race blindness” as a way to argue that race does not matter anymore. In its most optimistic framing, color-blindness operates on the fallacy that if we refuse to see race, racism itself will disappear. In its most pernicious manifestation, color-blindness functions as a tool of White hegemony to erase the past, block race-conscious reform, and perpetuate a White-dominant status quo that has remained firmly in place in the post-Civil Rights Era.

As a dominant ideology for managing the politics of race and racism, color-blind racism is an umbrella concept for a myriad of supporting ideologies. Many of these sub-ideologies were present in my participants’ narratives and I have chosen to organize my findings around these sub-ideologies. Various scholars of race and racism describe these sub-ideologies differently but, for the purpose of my study, the frameworks of color-blind racism offered by Bonilla-Silva (2006), Guinier and Torres (2003), and Wise (2010) appear to be the most salient in my participants’ meaning-making processes.

From Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) four-part framework of color-blind racism, two frames emerged frequently throughout my interviews: minimization of racism and cultural racism. The
minimization frame asserts that racism is no longer a major force in American society, while the cultural frame posits that any problems communities of color face might be tied to cultural deficiencies within those communities, rather than structural racism. Guinier and Torres’ (2003) schema for understanding color-blind racism is built around three axioms, all of which were significant in my participants’ narratives. First, is the proposition that race is just skin color, as opposed to race being a complex sociohistorical construct tied to both human bodies and power structures. Second, Guinier and Torres (2003) write that color-blind racism suggests that any popular invocation of race is in reference to biological or fixed notions of race. This reductive discursive maneuver inhibits substantive race-dialogue by suggesting that those who mention race are actually employing the outmoded trope of the biological racism (i.e. KKK members or eugenicists). And finally, this framework of color-blind racism argues that racism is popularly understood as now just person-to-person, rather than structural. Lastly, Wise’s (2010) critique of what he terms post-racial liberalism reveals a subtle twist on color-blind racism from liberal scholars like William Julius Wilson, who have argued that rather than focusing on race, post-Civil Rights reform should focus on class disparities through race-neutral economic programs. This class-over-race sentiment emerged in several of my participants’ responses and is my final significant finding. The next section of this chapter will be a review of my six significant findings for this theme before a brief conclusion.

Minimization of Racism

The sentiment that racism is no longer a major force in American society emerged in numerous ways throughout my participant interviews. In the example below, Kelly shares that she thinks that employers just hire whoever is best for the job. This assumption that we live in a
meritocratic society is a key neoliberal argument against race consciousness and many of my subjects seemed to believe it.

**Vijay:** Does… Do you think that racism impacts people’s ability to get that first job anymore in American societies today?

**Kelly:** I mean, I’ve heard that like companies trying making sure that there’s people of other races and everyone there, but I don’t, I wouldn’t like know a whole lot about that. I just feel like if people um, like management and hiring people, they take whoever they think is best for the job. They don’t take race or anything into consideration.

Similar to Kelly’s thoughts on hiring managers, Sarah shared her belief in meritocracy by reflecting on her own family’s journey.

**Vijay:** Umm, do you think these days in our present, is it… does everyone have an equal opportunity to succeed in America?

**Sarah:** Yeah, I think so.

**Vijay:** Any more you want to share about that?

**Sarah:** I mean I don’t, I really don’t think it’s a problem in education. Like you said, like people actually look for minorities, you know, and like I just … Like I know so many like second-generation kids whose parents have come here and they say like, “Yeah, I only came here on $20 and I managed to like raise kids and get a house and get a job and really work through it…” and stuff, and I definitely feel like everyone has an equal opportunity to like get… I don’t know… You know, like my parents, like they barely spoke English. My dad’s an engineer now, and he had to redo all of his like studying in
America. He didn’t have that much money on him, but like they still found ways, you know, like loans and stuff and they worked really hard; so I really don’t think that race or anything like that should get in the way of someone going through school or succeeding.

Sarah’s concluding remark that “…I really don’t think that race or anything like that should get in the way…” (emphasis added) directly speaks to the key tension in many of my subjects’ remarks. The politics of color-blindness operate on the key belief that racism, and its corollary race, should not matter and this wishful thinking seems present in the background of Sarah’s conclusion that everyone has an equal chance for success in America today.

I used the topic of affirmative action in every one of my interviews, both to gauge my participants’ understanding of structural racism in American society as well as to see how they made meaning of the unique position of Asian Americans in the national battle over race-conscious affirmative action policy. During my interview with Natasha, several interesting reflections emerged in response to our conversation on affirmative action.

**Vijay:** Oh should, well are you asking me? I was going to ask you. Should Affirmative Action policies still exist today?

**Natasha:** Um, hmm, maybe like not in a couple…. Maybe like in 30 years it shouldn’t.

**Vijay:** Hmm, what do you mean by that?

**Natasha:** I mean, like it’s been like, it’s been awhile. Like it’s not like they’re [people of color] not, they’re held back anymore.

Natasha’s comment that “…it’s not like they’re not…held back anymore,” prompted me to take the interview in a different direction. I spent a few minutes explaining the metaphor of the “glass
ceiling,” which Natasha had never heard of before. I also shared that there was some recent scholarship on a variant of this phenomenon, the “bamboo ceiling,” that described barriers to advancement specific to Asian Americans in the workplace. As I was concluding my explanation, I decided to probe and see what Natasha’s perception of corporate America was.

Vijay: Oh yeah. So the term exists because it’s such a major issue. And it used to be uh, the term really originated um because uh women and people of color would face these glass ceilings. And they’re reason they’re called “glass ceilings” is because glass, if you don’t know it’s there, looks like it’s not there. But if you run, if you’ve ever run into a glass door, it hurts right, like it’s really there, right. Um, and so glass ceilings are uh, are a part of the American corporate workforce. And one of the ways we know this is that there are uh 500 Fortune 500 companies, right. How many of those companies do you think have women or people of color in top positions?

Natasha: Um, 200, 300?

For me, this is a powerful endorsement of the minimization of racism frame. Natasha seems to think that 200 or 300 of the Fortune 500 companies have women or people of color in top positions. Natasha’s adherence to a post-racial (and seemingly post-patriarchal) meritocratic framework is emblematic of the salience of the minimization frame in my subjects’ meaning making process.

Beyond a belief in meritocracy, several of my participants shared stories where they were on the receiving end of racism, but their meaning-making process seemed profoundly affected by the minimization of racism frame. During the first segment of my interview with Lina, she shared several stories about growing up in Green Bay, Wisconsin that captured this phenomenon.
**Vijay:** Okay, that’s great. Umm, Lina, how would you describe your cultural background?

**Lina:** Umm, well back home it was predominantly white, so when I was in, umm, grade school, I was usually the only non white, one of the only non white, umm, people in school. And I wasn’t really judged for that though. Umm, well sometimes it seems to be like maybe it was just coincidentally but there was, umm, a girl who came in middle school and she was, umm, she was African American, and whenever we had to be put into groups I was always left with her.

*a few minutes later in the interview...*

**Lina:** And, umm, and then one day I asked her [Lina’s teacher] a question in class like during work time, and then she told me, “Wow, your English is really good,” and I’m like, “Oh, umm, I was born here.” And so it was kind of funny how it kind of made me laugh and it kind of annoyed me at the same time.

In these two examples, Lina reflects on profoundly racialized experiences that occurred in her nearly all-White school. Whether it was being grouped with the African American student whenever group-work occurred or being complimented on her English, Lina seems deeply conflicted about simply naming these incidents as racism. In her first account, she shares that her school was almost all White and then immediately feels the need to say, “And I wasn’t really judged for that though.” But then a mini-story almost erupts from her to counter her own psychological hedging. I think the minimization of racism frame is at work here in the way that Lina struggles with the racialized experiences in her all-White school setting. Lina seems troubled by the contradiction wherein if racism is a thing of the past, how can I understand my
present experiences of race? It seems that one strategy Lina employs is to laugh off her annoyance. When her teacher complimented her on her English, a deeply otherizing encounter, Lina immediately goes to the descriptor “funny” before sharing her annoyance.

My subject Ramjam’s experiences of race changed dramatically after 9-11. As a Pakistani Muslim, Ramjam visibly fit the racialized image of a Middle Easterner in the popular American imagery. During our interview, Ramjam shared a story where someone called him a terrorist on the school basketball court.

**Vijay:** ... umm, why do you think they said that to you?

**Ramjam:** Umm, I feel it was out of their own frustration possibly because one wouldn’t really joke about that and be like, “Oh, ha, you’re a terrorist,” like I mean it wouldn’t be like that situation. It was either out of frustration or the fact that he wanted to crack a joke in front of his friends, but it was out of the frustration at the moment, so yeah.

**Vijay:** Umm, did the person who said that to you know that you identified as a Muslim?

**Ramjam:** Yeah, he did.

**Vijay:** How did it feel when that happened?? How did you feel?

**Ramjam:** At first I was like confused, and then I mean like I was confused like the first 10 seconds and then like the next couple seconds I was like okay, whatever, he’s just mad; he’s just throwing out slurs at me. But then like slowly like I thought about it and told my mom about the situation, and like she was like oh, no, like I mean this, this and that happened, and she was like, “Don’t go to school anymore,” like, “Tell the principal,” blah, blah, blah; but I was like, “No.” I’m sure it was just out of frustration and whatnot
and like I wasn’t really hurt by it. I usually like found, umm, like a happy spot. I used to like ... I like probably laughed it off more than like found it serious to me.

Ramjam’s stern adherence to the explanation that the person who called him a terrorist was “just frustrated” erases the possibility that this person was racist. In Ramjam’s analysis, it appears that he even considered, for a moment, that something deeper was going on. But after 10 seconds of discernment, Ramjam decided that this person’s use of slurs was more about frustration than race. What is fascinating, in this story, is his mother’s alternate response. It seems she took the incident very seriously and, in my probing, Ramjam shared that his parents were keenly aware of the hate crimes targeting Muslim-identified Americans in the months following 9-11. Ramjam, however, appears steeped in a minimization of racism framework, as his response mirrors Lina’s, “I like probably laughed it off…”

This example also speaks to some of the ethno-racial complexities for Muslim-identified Americans in a time of heightened Islamophobia. Ramjam shared that someone called him a terrorist and, as a result of my probing, it also became clear that this person knew that Ramjam identified as a Muslim. From the data, it is unclear whether the perpetrator used the slur as an ethnic or racial aggression. Since 9-11, however, the American media and government have invested enormous resources in producing what Omi and Winant (1994) would term a “racial project” out of Islamic identity. Although Islam is a religion with an extremely heterogeneous following, a broad discourse campaign has consistently equated Islamic identity with a South Asian/Arab/Middle Eastern racial phenotype. This racial project, combined with Ramjam’s own racial identification as Muslim, lead me to understand this incident and Ramjam’s subsequent meaning-making process as an example of the minimization of *racism* frame.
Much later in that same interview, I decided to ask Ramjam to more explicitly share his thoughts on racism in present-day America.

**Vijay:** Okay. Umm, how about, how about racism? Do you think racism still exists in American society?

**Ramjam:** Yeah, I would say so.

**Vijay:** How do you know that? What do you see?

**Ramjam:** Umm, I see comedians like they would make fun of like particularly their own race and like throw like, you know, a couple low blows at their own race to like make the crowd laugh to pretty much break up that tension of like, umm, you know like making it ... they would take a serious, like a serious matter and turn it into a joke, and, umm, racism also like ... umm, I haven’t seen it recently, but like I still hear the N word tossed around a lot like either if I’m like on the basketball courts or walking around at school or like some random street in Chicago as well, so I feel like that’s still ... I feel that that N word is still a derogatory term towards African-Americans.

Ramjam’s response alludes to another finding in this chapter, the belief that racism is a person-to-person problem, but I found it helpful to include it in this section. Ramjam was quick to state that he thinks racism still exists, but when asked to share more, gives two very different, confusing answers to my question. His first example, comedians who use race humor to engage their own communities, seems to indicate a misunderstanding of racism as a concept. His second example, people using the “N-word” on the basketball court, is a typical capture of the modern understanding of racism as interpersonal and language-based. I think that this evidence points to an overlap between the minimization of racism frame and the racism is person-to-person frame.
For Ramjam, it seems that an understanding of racism that is entirely person-to-person produces a belief that racism has minimal impact on our current society. These findings also seem to indicate that the minimization of racism frame is dialectically linked to a failure to understand the structural nature of racism. While I will explore this possibility more deeply in my discussion chapter, I think it fitting to end with my participant Don’s conclusions. Don was one of my only participants to use the term “oppression” to describe the frequent experiences of racism he observed in American society. When I asked him more about oppression, however, he immediately went to his core belief that what matters most is individual perseverance. I decided to probe again and we concluded with this:

**Vijay:** So, how do those two things fit together? If perseverance can get you anything but there’s major oppression in our society, what does that mean for you?

**Don:** You could persevere through oppression.

**Vijay:** You can persevere through oppression.

**Don:** I feel if you put your mind to it, and if your mind and ambition is together, then perseverance will help you get through anything that you have to go through.

**Cultural Racism**

Bonilla-Silva (2006) employs this framework to describe the ways in which White people legitimate their racist beliefs by blaming communities of color for having “cultural deficiencies.” While this framework of color-blind racism was not salient for all of my participants, it did emerge on several occasions and I thought it important to include in my findings. In my first example, Victoria is trying to explain her statement, “…we’re the same underneath it all.” She begins by speaking about people who only hang out with other people of their own race, which
she finds deeply problematic. It is important to note that Victoria shared that she only hangs out with White people, but sees this as a race-neutral choice. Her narrative covers a lot of ground and, eventually, ends up in the terrain of cultural racism. Throughout the first part of her discourse, Victoria is using terms like “you” and “they” abstractly to describe people broadly in her high school.

**Victoria:** Like you’ve always, you’ve always done it [socialize with people of your own race] and a lot of ... maybe not even a lot of people but just people in general aren’t comfortable with putting themselves out there to make friends with lots of people and they keep more to themselves. And maybe that’s, maybe that’s just how they are, but I don’t think that necessarily calling the race card just because you don’t ... I don’t hang out with these people [other Filipinos] or I don’t ... that group of people I don’t really care for, or I only hang out with whites; I only hang out with blacks, Hispanics, whatever it may be. Like is that ... That’s your routine and you’re comfortable with it; I can respect that, but then you have no right to judge I guess and slur and call for equality if you’re not working for it yourself.

Like if ... Like when you vote, you have a right to complain about whatever official is elected if that’s the one that you didn’t vote for, if that’s the one you didn’t want in office; but if you didn’t vote, then you have no right to say anything because you didn’t use your voice and you didn’t, you didn’t contribute.

**Vijay:** Yeah.

**Victoria:** If you’re going to call the race card all the time, then why act like the stereotype and complain about the stereotype? Why not try to break the stereotype if you
just have such a problem with whatever stereotype you happen to be? Like I wasn’t really friends with her in high school, but she was Hispanic and she was very, she was very, very stereotypical and she had very strong views on stereotypes, like I’m going to be different, but it turned out she was a stereotype.

Vijay: What do you mean by that? Share more. Like what do you mean when you say she was stereotypical? How did she act?

Victoria: She was, umm, I guess she acted ghetto a lot, but I guess that’s ... She grew up south in Detroit, so I understand you act like where you come from; but she was complaining about the stereotype of the Hispanics having this boyfriend for years and years and then getting pregnant in high school. Oh, what do you know, you’re pregnant in high school and you’re not married, and you’re expecting another one this year, and she graduated a year ahead of me. And I don’t think that if ... Okay, yeah, sure, the first one is an accident; but clearly the second time around you would think you were smarter. And I don’t think she has a right to complain. She’s always speaking Spanish - and like I don’t mind because I like listening - but she’s speaking Spanish and then she gets ghetto; but then she only, umm, she complains about the boys she talks to, but they’re the ones she chooses to talk to. That was her choice. She doesn’t have to talk to the boys that are in the gang or whatever. And she made that choice to have the baby. Well, I have nothing against having the baby, but you were the stereotype that everyone talked about in high school, like that girl that just ends up pregnant for prom. Woo, you were pregnant. Well, it turns out she was pregnant at prom but it wasn’t from prom but like the stereotype, but still that’s pretty, it’s pretty close. And if you’re going to complain about a stereotype, why keep with it? If you think it’s so bad, then why wouldn’t you
work to change it or be the opposite? Or I don’t know, there’s a difference. Make a change, make a difference in people’s thought processes, make ...

In this passage, Victoria shares her frustration with a high school classmate that seemed to be very outspoken about stereotypes and race issues. In her critique of this classmate, Victoria seems to employ a cultural racism frame by shifting the analysis away from racism and back onto her Hispanic classmate, who Victoria feels is an embodiment of “the stereotype.” Victoria concludes that, “If you’re going to complain about a stereotype, why keep with it?” which, to me, rings of cultural racism, as Victoria clusters her classmate’s high school pregnancy and use of the Spanish language in the same critique. Elements of Victoria’s diatribe seem to use a culture of poverty framework to problematize the Hispanic community rather than structural racism that negatively impacts the Hispanic community.

In a slight departure from Victoria’s forceful use of cultural racism, the following exchange with Don appears to have a bit more nuance. In this example, as well as others throughout this chapter, I use the term Asian when speaking with my subjects, rather than Asian American. I made this choice in an attempt to use the same terms they were using, as almost all of my subjects were not familiar with the term Asian American. They used the term “Asian” to refer to Asian people in America and often seemed confused by the term Asian American, so I elected to just use the term Asian throughout my interviews, except where I was explicitly trying to see what they knew about the Asian American racial experience, like when probing about Asian American history or literature classes in high school.

**Vijay:** Are Asian people affected by racism?

**Don:** Not as much as others, I don’t believe not as much as others.
Vijay: How come?

Don: Umm, I guess you don’t hear much about like Asian people going, committing as much crime as other minorities, and I guess that plays an effect on the majority who are like, oh, these people are actually trying to do, trying to make, come up in this world, so they are a little lenient on us, a little lenient because they see we’re trying to be hard working.

Vijay: So, just so I can understand, umm, your answer, so Asian people don’t face as much racism because in our society they’re perceived to be harder working?

Don: Yeah.

Vijay: Okay. So in the opposite of that, is the reason that let’s say African-American people face more racism, is that because they are perceived to be less hard working?

Don: I mean no, it’s not like that. I wouldn’t put it that way. I mean everyone works as hard as their ability. But when you look at the news and you hear about shootings, they usually come out of majority African-American neighborhoods. Like we had about 500, about 500-something shootings this year, and majority of them came from the, you know, the Englewood neighborhood and around like the African-American neighborhoods. So, with that, hearing that people are just like they have a negative idea about how African Americans are.

Don attempted to explain his assertion that Asian Americans face less racism than other groups. In his explanation, however, he seems to link hegemonic White racism to a cultural racism frame whereby communities that try harder and commit less crime are going to receive
less racism from Whites. When pushed on his use of the cultural racism frame, however, Don recants with the statement, “I mean everyone works as hard as their ability.” He then goes on to theorize that the abundance of shootings in urban Black communities might have an effect on how Whites perceive Blacks and, thereby, lead Whites to be more racist towards Blacks and less racist towards Asian Americans.

I chose to include this example because of the complexity of this exchange. Don seems aware of the directionality of racism, from Whites to people of color. At the same time, Don appears to employ a mild culturally racist understanding that locates some level of control within communities of color. Using Don’s analysis, one could conclude that if Blacks appeared to be “…trying to…come up in this world…” Whites, and the attendant White power structure, would be “more lenient” on Blacks. Don’s narrative represents a fascinating blend of an awareness of White power and White racism, but a simultaneous omission of systemic racism or hegemony. Perhaps, it is Don’s ignorance of the mechanics of hegemony that leads him to employ a cultural racism frame to explain the different patterns of racialization for Asian Americans and other communities of color.

**Race is Just Skin Color**

The assertion that race is simply skin color appeared throughout my participants’ reflections. In the following example, Charlotte reflects on growing up in her predominantly White home community and her interracial relationship with Danny, her White boyfriend. Charlotte employs the race is just skin color frame to dramatically reduce the significance of race, along with the salience of race, in her worldview.
Charlotte: Um, I would say it’s predominately a Caucasian community, but um it’s not like I feel any different than my white counterparts.

[a few minutes later in the interview]

Charlotte: Um, I yeah, kind of. I mean I really don’t feel any different because than, you know, my white counterparts, because they’re just people to me. Um, like um, well, for example, um my boyfriend, Danny, um he is Caucasian. Um, and so one day we were like, oh yeah, we’re an interracial couple, I didn’t even realize that? And it was just kind of funny because like you know I’m so comfortable in my own brown skin and black hair, like around people who look very much different from me, that I really don’t ident… myself, identify myself as being different. But the times when I do feel different, um, it’s usually in a good way because then I’m like, oh, I’m unique.

In Charlotte’s account, her and Danny being in an interracial relationship is only nominal because the concept of race itself is reduced to skin and hair color. What’s particularly interesting about this passage, however, is that Charlotte moves from minimizing racial difference to minimizing racial salience, which was a common theme for many of my participants. She shares that she doesn’t identify herself “as being different.” This observation is important to my analysis because I frequently found my participants to both reduce race to skin color, thereby minimizing difference, but concomitantly also reducing their own racial salience as a byproduct of race being understood as simply skin color, rather than a central organizing mechanism for American society.
One of my subjects used the race as skin color frame differently than Charlotte, but with similar intensity. Here, Victoria shares her experiences of otherization, particularly linked to frequently being asked, “What are you?” as a child.

**Victoria:** So it was kind of awkward for me. What are you? I’m Filipino. Where is that? Well, the Philippines. You point it out on a map because ... I mean we were younger then so fitting in was more of a... more of a how you say… like it was a bigger deal when you’re younger to fit in versus when you’re older because when you’re older people will accept you. You know people will accept you regardless of what your - or you would hope to - racial, what your race is or ethnicity or how you grew up. But when you’re little, you see more color.

In this narrative, race is reduced to skin color and an assertion is made that race consciousness is for children, whereas color-blindness part of being a mature adult. Victoria states that, “…when you’re older people will accept you…” which only makes sense if viewed through the lens of race as skin color. In Victoria’s worldview, the bluntness of young people seems to be interpreted as them seeing color and the “politeness” of adults as people actually becoming color-blind. I found this to be a fascinating application of the race is just skin color framework to legitimate a color-blind approach as the way adults behave. In many ways, Victoria’s meaning-making process bolsters Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), where she writes, “The habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference” (pp. 9-10). In Victoria’s worldview, race itself seems to hold the place of this “discredited difference” and the adult, polite response is to simply ignore it.
Not all of my participants engaged this framework as overtly as Victoria or Charlotte. In the following exchange, Guy and I were talking about race and high school and, to me, the race is just skin color framework appears to be very subtly at work here.

**Vijay:** What do you remember learning about your racial identity in high school?

**Guy:** Learning about my racial identity? Um, that really race isn’t…. It helps bring people together in a sort, cause you go, you can identify: oh, he’s Asian, maybe you know I can strike up a conversation with him, maybe he might know a thing um…. Like if I were to bring up a topic he would also know the topic.

**Vijay:** Okay.

**Guy:** Um, but really it’s mostly just personal experience that…. Where am I going with this? Race isn’t a huge factor in making friends, it’s mostly just you know going out and having… and you know hanging out, having the time of your lives, that kind of sort… it’s those kinds of experience that helps make friends, uh connections to other people.

**Vijay:** Um-hmm.

**Guy:** So it isn’t really just race. Race is just there to feel more at home, cause you know when you’re at home with your family you, you’re surrounded by your own race.

Guy breaks from Charlotte’s construction of race, arguing that it *does matter* and that race is more than skin color. But, in some ways, Guy appears to spend a lot of energy reducing the salience of race in his narrative. He repeatedly hedges by claiming that race isn’t a huge factor, while also concluding that, “Race is just there to feel more at home…” which, to me, makes race pretty significant. I find that the contradictory tension in Guy’s narrative actually captures the
power of the race is just skin color frame. If color-blind racism asserts that race is simply skin color and, therefore, minimizes the importance of racial difference in our society, how can a young person make meaning of a lived experience in which race has been both profound and obscured simultaneously? I found this passage from Guy to be a significant capture of how the tension is lived, by placing race in the background and foregrounding “personal experience,” as though race has no bearing on personal experience.

While Guy’s narrative is both subtle and full of contradictions, Victoria gives direct voice to the race as skin color framework in one of her responses.

**Victoria:** The sooner people realize that we’re all just the same regardless of where we come from, that race card will start to fade when we’re all just Americans or I’m from Mexico and I’m white or I’m black and I’m from England or whatever it happened to be. And the sooner people realize that maybe race isn’t all to a person, the sooner like - not the sooner but the easier it will be for people to let go of past prejudices even if they don’t even realize that they have them.

With these words, Victoria offers us a window into the intimate connections between the race is just skin color frame and color-blind racism, as a dominant, hegemonic logic. Victoria moves us through the entire chain of concepts, beginning with the reduction of race to simply skin color to the minimization of racial salience for people to the ultimate outcome, the abandoning of prejudice altogether. From Charlotte to Victoria to Guy, my participants’ narratives speak to a point I will visit in my discussion chapter: for people of color, the race is just skin color frame actually seems to produce a lower racial salience which might leave them more susceptible to the logic of color-blind racism.
The Invocation of Race is the Invocation of Biological Notions of Racism

During my interview with Don, he described his group of high school friends as “very diverse.” I decided to probe and ask how this racial diversity played out amongst his friend group and the following exchange occurred.

**Vijay:** And, umm, do racial differences ever come up with your friends?

**Don:** No, not seriously.

**Vijay:** But even in joking?

**Don:** Yeah, we just joke; of course we just joke around but nothing too serious. We all, we don’t look at race. We don’t look at race like that.

**Vijay:** Umm, say more about that, that you don’t look at race like that. What does that mean?

**Don:** Like race is just your skin color, like we don’t ... there’s no really point to judge a person by his skin.

In this section of our interview, Don explicitly uses the phrase, “Race is just skin color.” While, after a first reading, this might seem like an appearance of the race is just skin color framework, I think it is actually a nuanced example of what Guinier and Torres (2003) describe as a color-blind racist strategy to reduce modern, color-blind racism to antiquated, biologistic forms of racial dominance. When I asked Don whether racial differences ever emerge in his diverse group of friends, he is quick to say no, except for jokes. He makes a strong color-blind statement that, “We don’t look at race” and then goes on to say that, since race is just skin color, racism is pointless. The logic, as it appears in Don’s narrative is that he and his friends are not racist.
because racism is pointless. He knows it is pointless because race is simply skin color, so racism, or more accurately, biological racism, is irrelevant. This is a powerful capture of a very nuanced aspect of color-blind racism. By reducing racism to biological racism, color-blind racism is able to effectively obscure modern, structural racism and keep the spotlight on truly niche, antiquated formulations of racism that still employ biologistic schemas to justify White superiority.

The hegemonic outcome of this framework is clearly evidenced in the following interview passage.

**Vijay**: So, do you see racism today in American society as more about individuals?

**Guy**: Yes. It’s, it’s not prevalent as before anymore because it’s not towards the like, it’s not a whole group anymore, you know, like the KKK Klan, that was the whole group right there. But now I think it’s more of a… just a close interaction, a personal interaction. Which is why like I see on Yahoo News like, I don’t see that many hate crimes anymore, you know. Um, if it was a group or something related to that sort of thing, like a gang member, then usually gang members they attack based on being provoked you know, doing signs, all that stuff, tagging over their tags. So it’s um, it’s not much of a racist kind of thing anything, more I think it’s just being provoked or not provoked and close personal interactions.

In his narrative, Guy referenced modern racism as being more person-to-person, which also happens to be my next finding. His specific reasoning, however speaks to the interconnections between the various frameworks of color-blind racism and I decided to use this evidence in this section of findings to highlight the ways in which various color-blind racist mechanisms support
each other. In the passage above, Guy explains that he sees racism these days as interpersonal due to a lack of groups like the KKK. It is of interest to me that he specifically mentions the KKK in his reflection, as the Klan can be understood as a chief symbol of biological racism in American history and in the contemporary landscape of the American racial imaginary. By linking an understanding of racism to an extremely overt organization like the Ku Klux Klan, racism itself becomes understood in only the narrow sense of biological racism. The outcome of this thinking, for Guy, is that he is able to read Yahoo News and the lack of hate crimes reporting leads him to conclude that racism is now more interpersonal. In this example, reductive biological understandings of racism support Guy’s conclusions that modern racism is now more person-to-person than structural. I think that this is an important example because it reveals how the various delivery mechanisms of a hegemonic framework are deeply intermeshed and I will revisit this phenomenon in my discussion chapter. Ironically, in his attempt to share an example of modern, interpersonal racism, Guy focuses on inter-gang violence, which even he concludes is not an example of interpersonal racism.

The race and racism is biological framework appeared a few other times for participants when they dealt with xenophobic remarks about their physical features. The following passages from my interviews with Lina and Charlotte serve as good examples of how this framework seems to displace the reality of race and racism in favor of biological explanations.

1. **Vijay:** Did you go home and tell your parents that, “This boy said my nose is flat; what’s up with that, mom and dad?”

   **Lina:** I did, umm, I did remember that and uh ...

   **Vijay:** What did they say when you told them what had happened?
Lina: I can’t really remember, but I know that, umm, after remembering that I know that’s like one of the characteristics of being Filipino too, so I guess I just grew to accept that, I guess.

2. Charlotte: Um, well, there are certain times when like people would be talking about like eye color. They’d be like, “Oh, you have such pretty eyes.” Like the you know bright blue, green, hazel, whatever, and I’ll be like, “Oh, mine are very dark.” And so I’ll be like, “Oh.” You know I was like over time I learned to accept like that’s just genes. And like, um having um, biological background I, you know, I definitely understand that more now that it’s like it’s nothing I can change so it’s nothing I should worry about.

Both Lina and Charlotte found themselves being racialized and otherized because of their physiology. Both of them seemed to employ a biological, scientific understanding of race to help normalize their physical difference. From flat noses to dark hair and eyes, Lina and Charlotte were actually being positioned outside of a White-dominant framework for understanding beauty. They seemed to cope with this marginality by explaining highly constructed racial difference as being “just genes,” rather than systemic oppression. While, in the immediate, they might have been able to experience some temporary relief from this way of thinking about their own race, this analysis does not leave them with any tools to deal with more sophisticated forms of racism that will continue to impact their lives in the long run.

Furthermore, this analytical process leaves Lina and Charlotte with no new insights as to the numerous ways that Whiteness perpetuates a system of racial dominance; the norming of White beauty standards is one powerful example.
Racism is Now Just Person-to-Person

Across the board, my participants characterized racism as interpersonal, rather than systemic. During my interview with Sarah, she revealed that she hoped to be a psychologist after completing her education. I was curious to see if she imagined her racial identity having any impact on this desired career.

Vijay: So yeah, thank you. Umm, when you look forward to your next couple of years of college, umm, do you think that your racial identity will impact your future college years at all?

Sarah: Umm, I hope not. I want to be…I want to be a psychologist, so I hope people don’t mind that I’m Indian. I hope it doesn’t affect my job or career at all, but I don’t expect it to be a problem.

For Sarah, imagining life after college means imagining life in her future profession, as a psychologist. When asked explicitly about whether her racial identity might have an impact on this experience, Sarah shared that she hopes that “…people don’t mind…” that she is an Indian. A few minutes later in the interview, I asked her about racism, rather than just her racial identity:

Vijay: That’s great. Umm, we’ve been talking a lot about racial identity and just race in the abstract. How about… How about racism, you know, just as a force, right? Do you think racism exists anymore?

Sarah: Umm, yeah, I think it always will with certain people. It’s just kind of you know, some people are just never going to change.
To me, this couplet of excerpts demonstrates not only the presence of the racism is now person-to-person frame, but one of the outcomes from this type of thinking. Sarah locates racism with “certain people” and when she imagines her future hopes that people will not mind that she is Indian. Sarah’s analysis of both race and racism is prototypical of my research subjects, as she demonstrated no knowledge of racism being systemic or structural.

Similarly, Kelly and Natasha both agreed that racism is still a factor in American life, but located racism as an interpersonal issue.

1. **Vijay**: Um, do you think that um, that racism is still a factor in American life today?

   **Kelly**: Stereotypes are definitely still present. I mean everyone knows the common stereotypes that, I don’t know, Taco Bell, Hispanics; Dunkin’ Donuts, Indians; like everyone has those stereotypes. And I, I personally have never experienced any like real racism where everyone is really trying to like be rude or mean to someone, but I guess like, I bet in some parts of the country it still exists, I just have never experienced it or seen it.

2. **Vijay**: Um, do you think that uh, that broad, more broadly than, than just your experience, but just sort of thinking broadly, does race play a role in American society today?

   **Natasha**: I, I think so. I think people want to like not pretend it doesn’t, but they want to like… they want to act, no… they want it not to. Like they want people not to…. They want to act like things changed. I mean it has, but you will always subconsciously think of like, like stereotypes, things like that. Like they are always playing in what we do. And so I think that when people make decisions sometimes, or like when people like interact
with people of different race, they are, they’re considering those stereotypes, even though maybe they’re not thinking of it like consciously, or they’re trying not to.

It is interesting that stereotypes enter both Kelly and Natasha’s reflections on racism, but neither seems to connect stereotypes to a broader system of structural racism. This particular understanding of stereotypes, as ignorant misperceptions about individuals or groups, appeared in many of my participants’ narratives. Kelly goes further to share that she has never received “…real racism where everyone is really trying to be like rude or mean…,” thereby revealing an understanding of racism as simply person-to-person meanness. Alternately, Natasha’s reflection seems to present a more sophisticated understanding of the subconscious influence of stereotypes on individuals. Unfortunately, Natasha also appears to be utilizing a popular definition of “stereotype” that offers little connection to structural racism so her perception that stereotypes influence people’s decision-making patterns doesn’t offer her a pathway to understand how then these decisions, in aggregate, institutionalize discrimination and create oppression.

The color-blind racist framework of understanding racism as interpersonal, rather than systemic and structural, seemed to have a broad impact on my participants. One of my participants, Victoria, shared that she spent much of her childhood and adolescence thinking that racism did not exist at all, even in its interpersonal form. Then, in high school, she was targeted by a teacher and treated poorly because of her non-Whiteness. During our interview, Victoria shared a lengthy reflection on how she felt when this teacher seemed to pick on her and grade her harder and how confusing the experience was to her. She began to look around and noticed that the teacher was targeting all of the non-White students and to Victoria, the pattern was pretty clear. When I asked her if the experience changed her at all, she offered the following answer.
Victoria: It did. I didn’t think that it actually existed. I was kind of blind. I had blinders on, and looking back I was kind of naive to think that it was completely gone because after ... it was a long time, like hundreds of years of racism to over ... it would be ridiculous to think that hundreds and hundreds of years of racism would be overcome in just a matter of, what a hundred years-ish, give or take, not even I don’t think, and I think it would be ... now that I think about it, it was ridiculous to think that, that racism was just gone. I figured when I was little and you don’t go into the true depths of racism when you’re younger, but that… like I was surprised to find out that the KKK actually still existed, and I figured that died out with the southern traditions of lynching and all of the nastiness that went down down there actually, and I thought that died with the times with the Civil Rights Act and all of that. I thought that maybe, maybe we did live in the, in a country that really did value quality, true equality, that blacks, whites, yellows, purples, they could all intermingle and be cordial, I suppose. You don’t have to like everyone you come in contact with, but is it really necessary to show such animosity or just degrade them to the point where they have to question their beliefs, their ethnicity, their self, I guess?

Victoria’s meaning-making process was irrevocably altered due to her experience of prejudice at the hands of a high school teacher. For me, as the interviewer, I heard significant pain and raw emotion in her recollection of the event and in her processing of the story during our interview. For individuals of color, there must be great psychological safety in imagining a world where racial hatred is safely locked into the vault of America’s past and only brought out in the stories we tell ourselves of national progress and reconciliation. In Victoria’s narrative, shedding the post-racial veil also meant reorganizing her worldview, into one where she was not as safe as she
used to be. Her learning from this tragic event, however, appears to be profoundly shaped by a limited understanding of racism as interpersonal. Victoria’s conclusion that we do not actually live in a world where everyone is equal and can intermingle cordially, evidences little cognition of the systemic nature of racial oppression in our society.

Class Matters... Race, Not so Much

The complex relationship between class and race emerged in several of my participants’ meaning-making processes. In each case, my participants seemed to clearly see socioeconomic class as a structural problem in American society, while reducing race to something personal and less systematic. This first example, from my interview with Ramjam, is a stellar example of the complex ways in which the politics of color-blind racism seem to inform his understanding of the salience of class and the “problem” of race.

Vijay: So, umm, do you think these days does everyone have the equal opportunity to succeed in American society?

Ramjam: Uh, everyone as anyone in general? Umm, the equal opportunity, no, because, umm, let’s say like a kid was born in like a working family rather than like a kid that was born in like upper class family, like he... the upper class kid would have more resources; he would have more you know resources and like the money to like get out there and do what he or she wanted to do or like, you know, like have a better education possibly, go to a better school with like actual computers or something rather than like a kid working and growing up in a working family, like maybe their school didn’t have computers or lap tops they can take home and maybe they don’t give them the same like assignments to
like, you know, use the Internet as much because they probably didn’t have Internet at home, so I feel like not everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

**Vijay: How about race, do you think race could give one person more opportunities or less opportunities?**

**Ramjam:** Umm, yeah, possibly because, I mean, I feel like there was a kid, he was Native American in my school in high school, and whatever like college he applied to he usually got in. Whether or not his scores were like off the charts or if it was mediocre at least, he would get in because he was Native American and he would get such a good scholarship as well rather than an Asian kid like me applying to like Brown University, for instance. Like with mine and his ACT score being the same and with my GPA being stronger, he would get in and I would not because I mean ... not that it happened but I saw that happen with a friend as well so ...

In my interview protocol, one of my questions was about affirmative action in college admissions processes. I included the question for two reasons, first to see if color-blind narratives were present in the way my participants understood affirmative action policy and second, to see if the unique Asian American subject position as *honorary Whites* in the affirmative action discourse appeared in these students’ narratives. Interestingly, most of my participants were not familiar with the term affirmative action, and when I would take a minute describe it, they recognized the policies and had quite a bit to say on the subject. Affirmative action also appeared in other places in the interviews, such as my subjects’ reflections on selective enrollment high school admissions processes, or in their broader thoughts on equal
opportunity in present day American society. The exchange with Ramjam at the beginning of this section is emblematic of the sentiments of my participant group.

When asked whether everyone has an equal chance at success today, Ramjam immediately responded with a thoughtful, nuanced capture of the ways in which socioeconomic class disparity impacts people’s chance at succeeding. Ramjam concludes that, because of class issues, “…not everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.” When I decided to probe about the role of race in social equality, Ramjam immediately shared a story of how a Native American student would be given advantages that he would not have been given in college admissions processes. It is important to note that Ramjam’s memories of how this Native American student might have been treated in the college admissions process seem to involve a lot of conjecture on Ramjam’s part and it is not clear from the excerpt above whether Ramjam actually knew a Native American student who received preferential admission. Across the board, my participants’ thoughts on race were heavily impacted by their perception that affirmative action was unfair to them.

One of my subjects, Guy, when asked the same question about equal opportunity, immediately started to talk about the unfair race policies in college admissions, so I reframed the question to see what he thought broadly.

Vijay: Um, let me reframe the question. Like the question is just broadly: Does everyone have an equal opportunity to succeed in American society today? Sort of regardless of those factors I guess would be the….
Guy: Right, regardless. If it’s regardless that factors, then yes, I believe everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. But if uh factors like financial situations were to come in, then I don’t believe that everyone has an equal opportunity.

Similar to Ramjam, Guy’s thoughts on race and equality were hyper-focused on affirmative action as an example of unfair racial policy. But, if affirmative action were to be removed from the analysis, Guy seems to think that race does not have an impact on individuals’ chance for success. While, for Guy, race does not work to limit or extend one’s chances of success, class clearly matters. This class-over-race thinking is articulated with greater depth and breadth in the following lengthy exchange with Kelly. This section of our conversation begins with Kelly’s reflection on having to attend The University over the flagship state school in her home state, due to receiving larger scholarships from The University than her top-choice school.

Vijay: Okay, um, when you…. When you ended up having to choose The University because of finances, uh how did it make you feel?

Kelly: Oh I hated it. I mean, like I felt like academically like going to school shouldn’t be about like how much money you have or anything, it should just be if you have the academics to get in, like you should be able to get in without a problem. Because I knew people from my high school, a majority of the people went to [the state school] and there were people who were from Hispanic origin who definitely did not have like the academics that would have gave them like the huge scholarships that they got. Like they’re basically going like for free.

Vijay: Wow.
Kelly: But it’s because of their nationality that they’re able to go, so that kind of really upset me about that.

Vijay: Did that feel unfair to you?

Kelly: Yeah, definitely.

Vijay: Um, do you remember talking with your parents uh about that unfairness?

Kelly: Yeah, I told my, I mentioned it to my dad and…

Vijay: What did he say?

Kelly: …he was pretty mad about that too, but he can’t, he can’t really do anything so.

Vijay: What was the conversation like when he was mad about it and you were talking with him?

Kelly: Well, I mean, I just told him how this one person at our school, she’s of half Hispanic origin who definitely was not like up to the par as many as other people were who are going to [the state school] and who got in, but she got this crazy awesome scholarship and her dad makes a lot of money anyway, so I just felt like she shouldn’t be getting the scholarship to go there. And he agreed and he was like, he told me that that’s unfair as well, but that’s how, you know, the whole college system works I guess, so.

Vijay: Why uh, why do you think that uh, that [the state school] has that system?

Kelly: I don’t, I don’t know, I just knew it as like…. Everyone knows it as a school that doesn’t give you a lot of money, as a public school. And I guess from what I’ve heard
from other people say that they don’t give a lot of money and the people who get money are ones from minority groups who are not, I don’t know, not represented as much.

**Vijay:** Okay, so it’s about like representation?

**Kelly:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** What do you think about that?

**Kelly:** That sucks!

**Vijay:** Did you, around that time when you were applying to colleges and you noticed what was going on with like one person in your school and their admission to [the state school] and the scholarship they got because they were part Hispanic…

**Kelly:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** …um, was there any conversation in your family or amongst your friends about Affirmative Action?

**Kelly:** Um, we talked about it in class a lot, but yeah, that came up, cause a lot of people at our school ended up going to [the state school] and they didn’t get scholarships at all, even though they definitely had the academics to get scholarships and they were pretty upset about like the whole Affirmative Action thing too.

**Vijay:** What do you remember, um, feeling or thinking about Affirmative Action yourself?

**Kelly:** I mean when I was a junior and not really, or like sophomore year, junior year beginning, I didn’t really… I thought it was a good things at points because I’m like it’s
good to have a representation of all races in a place so people can kind of get a feel of all different kinds of cultures. But if a family has enough finances to kind of pay their way through, even if they are under-represented, then I feel like they shouldn’t be categorized under the Affirmative Action group really.

Kelly unabashedly shares her perception that not only was it unfair that she didn’t get enough scholarship support to attend her top-choice school, but that the large number of Hispanic students from her high school that went to that university did, and that they didn’t actually have the grades to merit such financial aid. While this is a common narrative amongst White college students, this sentiment appeared in many of my Asian American subjects’ stories. Kelly proceeds to argue for a class-focused aid schema, rather than race. It is important to note that, in her concluding remarks on the subject, Kelly still articulates that “…it’s good to have a representation of all races in a place…” while still maintaining her preference for class-based policy rather than race conscious policy. This was a common tension in my subjects’ reflections – a firm adherence to valuing racial diversity while also being frustrated by their positioning within the current terrain of race-conscious policy.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored my second emergent theme, color-blind racism, by analyzing six key findings: minimization of racism, cultural racism, race is just skin color, the invocation of race is the invocation of biological notions of racism, racism is now just person-to-person, and class matters…race, not so much. In aggregate, these findings support the idea that color-blind racism is the dominant ideology informing my subjects’ understanding of race and racism today. Color-blind racism seems to shape my subjects’ thoughts that racism is not a major factor in present society, as well as the conviction that, sometimes, people of color bring problems on
themselves due to their cultural deficiencies. My participants also seemed to use a framing of race and racism as being simply about skin color and mainly interpersonal, which supports a worldview that minimizes racism by eliding its systemic and structural nature. Their adherence to the idea that the invocation of race is the invocation of biological, fixed notions of racism prevents them from understanding how a covert, modern system of color-blind racism can be just as injurious as more antiquated, overt formulations of racial hatred. And finally, the post-Civil Rights platform of class-conscious, rather than race-conscious, reform seems to have gained some traction in my subjects’ collective worldview, particularly in the arena of affirmative action and college admission policy. I will discuss the implications of these findings, in light of my research questions, in Chapter 8 of this dissertation. In the following chapter, I will explore the presence of Asian American racial tropes in my participants’ narratives and meaning-making processes.
CHAPTER 6 – THEME 3: ASIAN AMERICAN RACIAL TROPES

Introduction

In this chapter, I will share the findings for one of my emergent themes, Asian American racial tropes. This dissertation study examines the meaning-making process surrounding Asian American college freshmen as they negotiate their racial identity development process. Using racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994) it is possible to understand Asian American racial identity as a *racial project*, constructed and reconstructed over time, in response to socio-historical processes within the White hegemonic state. This framework of conceptualizing race has been enriched and deepened within the critical scholarship on Asian American racial identity (Alvarez, 2002; Junn, 2007; Kim, 1999; Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007) as researchers sought to codify how the state positions Asian Americans within the broader American racial milieu. This body of scholarship offers us a set of Asian American racial tropes, many of which informed my participants’ meaning making processes. Constructs like Model Minority typology, Forever Foreigner stereotypes, or the Problematics of Panethnicity appeared to be present in many of my participants’ narratives. Beyond internalizing these tropes in their identity formation, my interview subjects were overtly challenged by these racial tropes in their lived encounters with racism. Examining the actual moments where overt racism impacted my subjects’ lives is critically important to understanding one of the ultimate effects of being racialized as Asian American within the hegemonic state.

This dissertation is also an intersectional study of the aforementioned racialized meaning-making processes and college student identity development. The literature on identity development for college students describes racial identity development as a critically important aspect of holistic growth (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; Alvarez & Helms, 2001; Chickering &
Reiser, 1993; Helms, 1990; Renn, 2003). The findings presented in this chapter support the idea that college student racial identity development is happening in a dialectical response relationship with multiple contextual influences (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007), with Asian American racial tropes and experiential encounters with racism being salient parts of these formative contexts. The literature on college student identity development challenges us to understand these findings in light of broader developmental processes that are integral to the young adult journey into adulthood. The findings presented in this chapter speak to this intersectional reality, as my subjects’ struggles with making meaning of their Asian American experience are also the struggles of learning what it means to be an adult of color in a complex and racialized society. The next section of this chapter will share the four significant findings for this emergent theme before a brief conclusion.

**Model Minority Typology**

Model Minority typology positions Asian Americans as nerdy, naturally gifted at math and science, prone to being doctors and engineers, and academically high achieving. This same formulation also positions Asian Americans as passive, not naturally inclined towards leadership, and as *honorary Whites* in the logic of the American color line (Junn, 2007). While this dissertation study was not focused on how Model Minority stereotyping impacts Asian American college students’ meaning-making processes, this trope did emerge in ways that indicate a significant relationship between Model Minority typology and racial identity development.

**Charlotte:** And then I’d be like, Filipino, Filipino, Filipino on the page, so like you know, just I kind of like to be recognized for being different. Um, but any time Asian Americans did come up, um, a lot of the stereotypes would be like hard working, school,
school first. And like my… actually my Filipino friends and I joke that a B is an Asian fail, or something.

**Vijay:** Uh-huh, okay.

**Charlotte:** Um, is like the funny thing is, like although we half joke about that we’re half serious at the same time.

In the exchange above, Charlotte astutely observes that any time Asian Americans came up in her high school classes, the stereotypes surrounding the community seemed to inform the conversation. She then shares that her friend community used to joke about a letter grade of a B being an “Asian fail.” While she admits to being only, “…half serious,” in her joking, I found this exchange to be indicative of the complex relationship between hegemonic discourses and oppressed group members. A little later in the interview, I was explicitly describing the Model Minority archetype and asking her what she thought of it and Charlotte explained the following:

**Charlotte:** I don’t think so, because like you said, the model minority, which is like, I think that’s why I have like not had really any trouble accepting it because I’m like that’s actually a good way to be, you know, quiet, respectful. Um, I can be quiet, believe it or not. Um, you know, hard working and like I do feel the benefits from it and so it’s like, why not kind of thing.

It occurred to me throughout my interviewing process that the stereotypes surrounding Asian American identity might be more easily internalized by my research subjects because they did not seem to hold any counter-narratives through which to resist and reject the dominant logic of their racialization. While I will delve more deeply into this idea in my findings section on
Perpetual Foreigner stereotyping, I did capture an exchange with one of my participants, Natasha, where this issue of dominant and counter narratives emerged with great clarity.

**Vijay**: What does it mean to you to be Asian American?

**Natasha**: Hmm. I don’t know? I feel like if I was, if I was going to identify myself, or just like in a broad term like Asian Americans, when I think of that, would just be that… Like, I just, I can’t help thinking of stereotypes or like just like the idea that Asian Americans, like what….

**Vijay**: Like what stereotypes come to mind?

**Natasha**: Like strict, like serious kind of like. I don’t really know that many things about Asian Americans actually.

In this exchange, I ask Natasha one of my standard interview questions, about what it means to be Asian American and in her initial response she struggles to find an answer. She quickly shares that she can’t think of anything to say other than to mention the stereotypes about Asian Americans and when probed, she shares that she thinks of Asian Americans as strict and serious. She then concludes that she doesn’t really know much about Asian Americans. It seems, in the absence of information to counter stereotypes, they became more salient for my subject.

My research participant, Lina, also wrestled with the stereotype of Asian Americans being stricter than other communities, but she seemed to be able to nuance her understanding of the stereotype with her own lived experience.

**Lina**: Umm, my parents are two of the most supportive people in my life, and, umm, they are really hard working. My dad, he moved here in the States in 1993 after my
parents got married, and he’s a hard working nurse and he’s been working for a while. And my mom, she went back to school. She used to be a banker, but she went back to school to be a medical assistant so, umm, she could work and make better money, so I really admire her for that. And they ... Because there’s that stereotype where Asian parents are like really strict - and, umm, my parents, they can be strict - but, umm, they are understanding at the same time, so I wasn’t like held down or anything when I was back home.

In this case, Lina is using her own lived experience of having understanding parents that did not “hold her down” to possibly challenge the Model Minority stereotype of strict and stern Asian Americans. As a researcher, I was surprised with how often my subjects mentioned “strict” in their description of stereotypes surrounding the Asian American community, which was a poignant reminder for me that hegemonic discourses evolve over time and that the canonical scholarly literature on this subject might not have caught up with more nascent discourses of the Asian American “Tiger Mom” variety.

For two of my participants, Kelly and Sarah, being perceived as smart, as a result of Model Minority typology, appeared in their reflections. In my interview with Kelly, the subject of race and college admissions occupied a sizeable section of the middle of the interview. Kelly stated that her top choice college, which she did not attend due to financial barriers, preferred to offer scholarships to “minorities.” I decided ask her to share more about that statement.

Vijay: Hmm. So um, do you think that ah South Asians are included in the minority group at [the state school]?

Kelly: No, no.
Vijay: How come?

Kelly: I mean they’re known as being like the smart ones who have like great jobs, so I, I feel like the minority groups that people consider for that are like Hispanic, African American, Native American.

Vijay: Hmm.

Kelly: They don’t, I don’t feel like they put Asians in that category.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: There’s a lot of them at [the state school].

Vijay: So there, that’s the truth, there are a lot of them at [the state school]. Um, and you were saying that you feel like there’s this rap around Asians that they’re the successful ones?

Kelly: Yeah, definitely.

Vijay: What’s that all about?

Kelly: I mean I guess from like countries back home the schooling is different, they’re more focused on books and doing well in class, so I guess when they come over to America they grab all the great jobs because they have like more experience and are more educated. So that just carries over to the whole stereotype that Asians are smarter and have better jobs, I guess.

Kelly appears to be acutely aware of how Asian Americans are positioned as honorary whites in American race discourse. When asked explicitly if South Asians count as minorities, she clearly
says no and then goes on to conjecture that this might be because, “…they’re known as being like the smart ones who have like great jobs…” versus other groups of color. I found it intriguing that Kelly used the words, “…they’re known as…” which indicates some perception of a narrative surrounding a community. However, upon deeper probing, Kelly theorizes that maybe the Model Minority stereotype emerges from Asian Americans actually being more educated and having “…all the great jobs.” Later in her interview, Kelly also shared the following ideas on where the Model Minority stereotype might come from.

Vijay: Yeah, what do you think about the fact that that stereotype exists, where does it come from?

Kelly: I mean, people who came from them in the beginning, like came from Asia in the beginning, they kind of set the whole stepping stone I guess for those stereotypes. And like even in world news people hear about all the advancements Asia is making, all the things like every product we see over here, made in China or made in wherever Asia. So, I guess they’re like a really dominant name in America as well, so that kind of gets people the idea that they have all this money and they are so successful and everything. So that kind of just adds onto the stereotype as well.

Kelly appears to be observing the world around her and concluding that the Model Minority stereotype must emerge from the recent rise of certain Asian economies on the world stage. The ahistoricism in Kelly’s reflection is not unique to Kelly and will be discussed in greater depth in the next findings section on the Forever Foreigner trope. However, it is important to note the interlocking nature of each of these racial tropes and the ways in which they scaffold each other in my participants’ meaning-making processes. Kelly’s lack of knowledge about the Asian
American experience, due to Forever Foreigner dynamics, leads her to make conclusions about the Model Minority stereotype that serve state interests by obscuring the role of race and power in constructing racialized others.

Similar to Kelly, my participant Sarah also was keenly aware of the narrative surrounding Asian Americans.

**Sarah:** That makes sense, you know, like I’ve never heard of like the actual like term model minority, but people always like hint at like what it means; like you know they’re just like, “Yeah, they’re Asian; like they’re just so smart,” and like stuff like that. And whenever like I talk about my parents and like the reason why like I started out with having like a pharmacy major and they’re like, “Well, yeah, you’re Indian. All you people are like lawyers, engineers and doctors,” and whatnot.

In the passage above, Sarah is responding to me describing the term Model Minority and explaining some of the popular narratives embedded in this typology. She affirms my statement that this is a dominant stereotype for the Asian American community and then she shares two examples of how people around her have revealed that they have internalized the Model Minority myth. She also, however, makes reference to the fact that she began college as a pharmacy major, in order to appease her parents. By the time of my interview with Sarah, the first quarter of college had already concluded and Sarah had changed majors to psychology. Sarah’s story of beginning college in the sciences is a very common theme in the Asian American collegiate experience and speaks to the dialectical relationship between stereotypes and subordinated communities. Sarah’s narrative reveals the possible impact that being called a Model Minority can have on one’s meaning and choice making processes.
Forever Foreigner Stereotypes

Race and racial projects are more analogous to a messy, knotted ball of yarn than a cleanly constructed device with squared off angles and finished lines. The Forever Foreigner trope entered my subjects’ narratives primarily through an intense, oblique, ahistoricism. Across all nine of my participants, they knew little to nothing of the broader Asian American historical experience. One of the ways that Asian Americans are perpetually rendered more foreign than American is through the selective elision of Asian Americans from social science and humanities curricula in k-12 settings. This erasure creates a discourse that all Asian Americans are new immigrants and it appears that many of my participants internalized this hegemonic logic. Beyond depriving my subjects of knowledge about their peoples’ important place in American life, this gap also undoubtedly contributed to some of their explanations for, and acceptance of, the Model Minority stereotype. I asked all of my participants questions about their high school curricula and what they learned about Asian Americans, or their racial group. The following is a prototypical exchange.

**Vijay:** Okay. Um, do you remember learning anything about um, about Asian Americans in high school?

**Kelly:** No, not really, no.

**Vijay:** Any uh, and when you were taking like history class or literature did you read anything about Asian American history or Asian American literature?

**Kelly:** Never literature; history wise, just wars with like Pearl Harbor and things, that’s really it.

**Vijay:** Okay. That’s what comes to mind, Pearl Harbor?
Kelly: I mean that’s the only thing that we ever talked about so.

Vijay: Okay. What did you talk about when you talked about Pearl Harbor?

Kelly: Um, we watched a movie, so I’m not sure.

Vijay: You watched a movie?

Kelly: Yeah. We didn’t really talk a whole lot about it.

Vijay: Did…. Was there any conversation about the internment of Japanese-Americans?

Kelly: Um, I think we hit on it for a little bit, just how after the whole Pearl Harbor scare there were like camps and everything set up so, I don’t know, Americans were getting scared about how they might try doing another attack so they put them in camps like that. But that’s really all we talked about.

Kelly stated that she learned very little about Asian Americans in high school. Her initial answer is actually about the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, rather than anything specific to the Japanese American experience. When probed about Japanese American internment camps, she did recall a discussion of Pearl Harbor and the camps. The incarceration of Japanese Americans did appear in several of my participants’ narratives, but none of them were able to share much beyond remembering that it was mentioned.

The following lengthy exchange with Lina reflects a similar experience as the one Kelly shared.
**Vijay:** When, uh, when you think back to your course work in high school, umm, history, English, courses like that, what do you remember learning about the history of Asian Americans or the literature of Asian Americans?

**Lina:** Actually, we didn’t really learn specifically, umm, like in class we didn’t really go ... It’s interesting, we didn’t really go over like Asian Americans really, which I thought was interesting. Umm, although, we did go over like the time when, umm, like the Chinese came and, umm, there wasn’t really much covered about it though.

**Vijay:** What do you remember about that, the incident when the Chinese came?

**Lina:** Umm, I think it was like about how, umm, different they looked from all the other people who were here, and it was right around the time of the wars too.

**Vijay:** The ... Which wars?

**Lina:** Umm, I’m not like really a history buff.

*[Laughter]*

**Lina:** I’m sorry.

**Vijay:** Sure, sure.

**Lina:** But, umm, I think it was like the World War, World War II maybe.

**Vijay:** Umm, so overall you’re saying you kind of didn’t really cover much about Asian American history or Asian American literature.
Lina: Yeah, it’s just like a small section I remember, like it was just read over and then pretty much what we got tested on was like the other stuff pretty much.

Vijay: The other stuff?

Lina: Or the, umm, I guess like ... I don’t really know how to word this but, umm, I guess it was just the general stuff like how life was. They didn’t really go over, umm ... like they didn’t really specify, but it seemed they didn’t really include the Asian Americans really in it.

Vijay: Who did they include?

Lina: It was ... It seemed like they were … To me it just seemed like they were talking about the white Americans pretty much and then the, umm, like when the African Americans were able to, umm, draft in the war; but other than that, I don’t really remember the Asian American part.

Lina’s exposure to any Asian American curricula also seems limited to a few nebulous encounters with Asian American history. She remembers something about Chinese migration, but is not able to connect the memory to a larger understanding of labor power, exploitation, racial exclusion, or nationalism.

Other manifestations of the Forever Foreigner trope emerged when several of my participants spoke about Asian, rather than Asian American, contexts in their answers to my questions.

Vijay: So I wanted to ask you about, umm, in high school, umm, what do you remember learning about your racial identity in high school?
Victoria: Really, umm, that was like freshman year when I actually learned like World History because after that I had the opportunity to just focus on American History because I really like it; but, umm, other than Magellan getting killed and dismembered in the Philippines and never found again....

[Laughter]

Victoria: ...that’s, that’s about it. And then, umm, World War II, that’s about all the Philippines is ever brought up, like World War II the Americans came over and went over to the Philippines and they pushed Japan out; and then other than circling the world, that’s pretty much all that’s mentioned about the Philippines, the little few islands.

Vijay: What about ... So you said you really enjoy American History.

Victoria: I do.

Vijay: What do you, what do you remember learning about the history of Filipino Americans in your American History courses?

Victoria: Nothing, nothing, nothing really because when you go over like Asian struggles, it’s more Chinese, Japanese being, umm, isolated and put into the camps like in World War II. It was more the Chinese and the Japanese that got that treatment or that we know of. I mean I don’t know the records then. I never really studied World War II as much as I have the Civil War; but other than that, I don’t remember anything about it.

When asked about learning about her racial group, Victoria went immediately to a story about Magellan getting dismembered in the Philippines. In retrospect, I should have asked the initial question with greater clarity, using the term Asian American rather than racial group, to avoid
this ethno-racial confusion. Realizing my mistake, I attempted to reframe the question and ask specifically about the Filipino American experience, since Victoria had shared her preference for American history. Victoria is able to name issues of isolation and incarceration for Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans but then she alludes to this type of treatment being reserved for those groups, rather than being applicable for Filipino Americans as well.

The slippage between Asian American experiences and Asian experiences was also present in Ramjam’s answer to my question about Asian Americans in the curriculum.

**Vijay**: So, umm, what do you remember learning about your racial group in high school, in class? Do you remember in any courses learning about your racial group?

**Ramjam**: Uh, maybe my global studies class and like we like global studies was more focused on like all of the world’s history, so like not only was it U.S. history it was like middle east and like earlier times in Europe as well, and so like we learned like a little bit about Muslims like during Prophet Mohammed’s time and whatnot, but that was about it. And every other class wasn’t really focused on like Muslims in general.

**Vijay**: What about ... Do you remember reading anything about or learning anything about the history of Asians in America? And I’m using the term Asians as anybody from Asia, so not the specific way you were using it but like any Asian people broadly. Do you remember learning anything about Asian Americans?

**Ramjam**: Uh, we learned maybe like some historical facts of like how the Middle Asians or like the Middle East Asians or like they invented geometry, like the number 0 and obviously those are my math classes; but other than that, umm, I don’t remember learning about like Asians in general in like the U.S. or like society.
Ramjam seems to take a question about his racial group as a cue to speak about Muslims, which is no surprise given that he answered my demographic question about how he identifies racially with the answer, “Muslim.” Differently than Victoria, however, Ramjam is not able to re-center himself back on the Asian American experience, even after I focused and clarified my question. He first shares several facts about Asians and mathematics and then concludes by sharing that he can’t remember learning anything “…about like Asians in…U.S. …society.”

The relative lack of information about Asian Americans seemed to do more than just leave my subjects unequipped to engage the politics of Asian American racial identity. In two cases, Forever Foreigner tropes appeared to actively misinform and create distance between two of my participants and Asian American identity. In my interview with Don, the question of whether he identifies with the term Asian American at all revealed that Don only identified as Indian and did not have any affinity to the term Asian American. When I asked him what he knew about Asian Americans, the following exchange emerged.

Vijay: Umm, and when you think about that history, umm, does any part of American history come up for you?

Don: Like relating to like struggles of an Indian in America?

Vijay: Mm-hmm.

Don: Umm, no, just hate crimes, just hate crimes, nothing like as bad as like Imperialism, nothing as bad as that.

In order to fulfill an elective credit, Don had taken a course on Indian history in his first quarter of college. The course, along with conversations with his family members, had provided Don
with a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of British colonialism in India. In the
exchange above, Don seems to demonstrate one of the outcomes of obscuring Asian Americans
in the K-12 curricula when he states that, other than being victims of hate crimes, Indians in
America have never experienced anything as bad as imperialism. This statement speaks to a
depth of knowledge in one arena and an absolute lack of awareness in another. Don is not able
to connect his passionate understanding of ruthless colonialism in India with the United States’
imperial relationship to racialized labor. Nor is he able to understand the intimate connections
between British imperialism and the movement of migrants out of India towards America during
the Industrial Revolution. Through an ahistorical lens, the Indian struggle in America is reduced
to present day hate crimes and over 150 years of Indian life in America is lost in translation.

Similar to Don, Natasha’s limited exposure to Asian Americans in her high school
curricula seemed to have the effect of distancing her from Asian American racial identity.

Vijay: Yeah, like in um, let me be more specific. Do you remember uh learning anything
about Asian Americans in high school, like in history class or literature?

Natasha: Oh wait, let me think about this… (long pause)

Vijay: You know like English class, history class.

Natasha: Asian Americans. Um, I took psychology; I think there was like just uh, well
they were talking about like…. I mean it sounds so like stereotypical. Like a lot of the
things sound stereotypical to even like, like just the fact that like Asian Americans,
they’re more conservative, things like…. Like I don’t see myself like, like that.
Natasha recalls learning about Asian Americans in her psychology class but is also able to name that what she learned about them seemed very stereotypical. She states that the curriculum in her psychology class labeled Asian Americans more conservative and immediately distanced herself from that characterization by stating, “…I don’t see myself like, like that.” This appears to be an example of both the Model Minority and the Forever Foreigner trope at work. Due to the Forever Foreigner trope, Natasha learned little to nothing about Asian Americans in high school. When they did emerge in her curricula, however, the characterization of the group was so influenced by Model Minority typology that it was actually alienating for Natasha.

**The Problematics of Panethnicity**

“Asian American” is a panethnic racial label that attempts to link the experience of the numerous ethnic groups that have emigrated from Asia to the United States. As a racial label, it is an index of a group’s relationship to the state and, through a Critical Race Theory lens, is an accounting of sociohistorical struggle between White hegemony and a racialized other. My participants, however, did not seem to possess this understanding of the term “Asian American” and had very little affinity to the label. In this section of findings, I will share numerous examples of how ethnicity, nationality, and race emerge in paradoxical and contradictory ways in my participants’ narratives.

**Vijay:** Um, you said your, your roommate is Asian?

**Kelly:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** What specific ethnicity, if you don’t mind sharing?

**Kelly:** Vietnamese I think?
Vijay: Vietnamese?

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: So when you, when you think about your Vietnamese roommate, do you consider yourself, you and your roommate, part of the same racial group?

Kelly: No, no. I don’t know; I always consider that Asian separate from like South Asians.

Vijay: Oh, okay. So like, so South Asian is different that Southeast Asian.

Kelly: I guess, yeah.

Vijay: Or East Asian.

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: I don’t know? Just how, I don’t know; how I’ve lived by. I mean no one’s ever considered Indians as Asians really. Since I was little, like people never knew that was part of Asia, so I never really considered myself as Asian. People thought I was in the Middle East, so I have no idea about that, but I just kind of considered India Pakistan, like one area, and then Asian is Chinese. The first thing that people think of when they say, when they say Asian, is probably Chinese or Japanese, so that’s probably why.

Vijay: Yeah, I agree. That’s pretty interesting, isn’t it; when you say Asian people think Chinese or Japanese.
Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Vijay: Even though like the Middle East is in Asia, Russia is in Asia, right.

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Vijay: Um so, so there’s clearly something going on there.

Kelly: Yeah.

In this exchange, it seems that Kelly is fully aware of the language idiosyncrasies when it comes to the term “Asian” in popular American English. She does not, however, seem to be able to explain what is happening linguistically, although she seems to know that it does not make any sense that Indians aren’t thought of as Asian. This disconnect is salient to the racial meaning-making process, however, because none of my study participants identified ethnically as East Asian. The term Asian American might seem inappropriate to someone who is operating on the logic that their ethnic group is not a part of Asia.

In my interview with Ramjam, I noticed that he used the term “brown kids” in describing his high school demographics. I decided to probe further to see exactly who, in Ramjam’s mind, falls into this category.

Vijay: So North. How would you describe [suburban high school “A”] racially?

Ramjam: Uh, racially I would describe it freshman and junior year ... I mean freshman and sophomore year it was predominantly white and, uh, I would say like the next big race was like the brown kids and then the Asians and blacks; and then junior and senior year it got predominantly black because of the Evanston Section 8 housing event. So they moved towards more like the Skokie area rather than Evanston and they started
going more towards [suburban high school “A”] because the Section 8 housing was more like on the border of [suburban high school “A”] than [suburban high school “B”].

Vijay: And then you said the brown kids.

Ramjam: Right.

Vijay: Does that include ... so are you saying south Asians?

Ramjam: South Asians like mainly like Muslims, Hindus, Christians as well, mainly like the darker-skinned students.

Vijay: Okay.

Ramjam: Yeah.

Vijay: Are Latinos included in that group?

Ramjam: Uh, no, they were not

Vijay: So when you’re saying Asians, which groups are you referring to specifically?

Ramjam: I would say Asians as in like Chinese, Japanese, Korean.

Vijay: So are Indians and Pakistanis not Asians?

Ramjam: They are, just like I guess around the, umm, where like I grew up the slang was more referred, the Asians were more referred to like, you know, the ones with like the small eyes.

Vijay: Okay.
Ramjam: Yeah, and the browns were like referred to the ones that had the darker skin than the white kids.

Vijay: What about ... where would someone that was like Filipino fall in that?

Ramjam: Filipinos would be considered Asian as well.

Vijay: Okay.

Ramjam: Because some Filipinos in our high school would have like the smaller eyes amongst the friends or like, umm, some would say ... say like oh, yeah that’s only because of brown ... you know, because like they’d have darker skin, but like eyes as like a Caucasian student.

In Ramjam’s lexicon, the “brown kids” appear to be South Asian Americans, which he says is a distinct group from the “Asians” who are, “…the ones with like the small eyes.” In the absence of the language of race, Ramjam appears to be using a mix of geography and physical phenotype to classify people into different groups. Again, in this example and the previous example, it seems that South Asians do not fit in the Asian category, which could challenge a member of the South Asian American ethnic community in their process of identifying as Asian American racially.

A different manifestation of the Problematic Panethnicity trope emerged in one of my subject’s exploration of the phenomenon of Asian Americans getting asked, “What are you?” with great frequency. The “What are you?” phenomenon is discussed at some length in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, as it specifically related to the ethnicity paradigm. In the following instance, however, the problematics of panethnicity seem to be further complicating the way
Victoria appears to be making meaning of her experience. This exchange begins after Victoria shares the prototypical “curiosity” explanation to my question about why she gets asked “What are you?” so often.

**Vijay:** So if it’s human nature to be curious, why do you think it is that you’re getting asked, “What are you?” so often but not black people or white people who make up quite a large part of this country?

**Victoria:** Yeah, this is true. I’m in an American Politics class, and I’m loving it; and, umm, the other day we had this blog that we have to do, and it was breaking down our country into, umm, ethnic groups; and the whites just it’s a broad spectrum. There’s no like Italian or anything. It’s just white. And then blacks are, it’s not African or St. Lucian or Ugandan or anything. It’s just African American. And then there’s, umm, there’s the Asian group who like... I’ve noticed being friends with different Asians and stuff, they identify more with their country versus like the broad spectrum of Asia. It’s more, “I’m Indian. I’m not Asian.”

**Vijay:** Mm-hmm.

**Victoria:** Versus, “I’m white,” or “I’m African American. I’m not St. Lucian. I’m not from there.” And you’re like, “Where you from?” “I’m from the Philippines.” “Oh, were you born there?” “No, but that’s what I consider home.” And I think that while ... And then for the blacks though, I feel like it was harder to - for some, for some - to track down where you actually came from...

**Vijay:** Right.
**Victoria:** ...considering the slave trade and all of that, so it’s harder for them to actually, “Where are you from?” Well, here obviously. So I feel like ...

**Vijay:** Why don’t people look at you and assume you’re from here obviously?

**Victoria:** I don’t know. I’ve never really, umm, I’ve never really thought about it like that, but I think it’s because like the Asian population is like the minority of the minority. And then you like break it down, and then there’s even more minorities within that. And like there’s Chinese and there’s Indian and Filipino and there’s Korean and all of the different, and you identify with whatever you just happen to be instead of just grouping like very ... I’ve noticed Asians are very proud. They are very, very proud. Even like Middle Easterns, like they say they’re Chaldean but they know that they’re from ... they celebrate Iraq or Afghanistan.

I find this exchange to be particularly fascinating because Victoria makes many insightful observations while trying to figure out why she would be asked “What are you?” while others are not. She quickly identifies that there are other groups, like White and Black, that seem to abide by these larger group names, rather than use specific ethnic identities like Italian or Ugandan. In light of my professional experience working with first year college students, this seemed like an extremely advanced observation and one that could be revelatory if combined with a racial schema. Victoria, however, is not able to make the conceptual leap from that statement to the idea that the Asian analog for White and Black is Asian American, another racial identity. Elements of the Forever Foreigner trope also seem to enter the meaning-making process when Victoria observes that Blacks, due to the historic slave trade, would be perceived to be from here,
“obviously.” I attempted to probe for a connection at this moment by asking Victoria why people do not make the same assumption about her. Without knowledge of Asian American racial formation, and the Forever Foreigner trope, her reflection veers from a numerical explanation to the possibility that Asians are perpetually rendered foreign because of their own ethno-national pride.

A final salient appearance of the Problematic Panethnicity trope appeared in my conversation with Kelly. During our lengthy discussion on affirmative action and college admissions, I noticed that Kelly actually used the term Asian American at one point in her narrative and decided to ask what she meant specifically when using those words.

Vijay: Hmm. Um, you used the term a few seconds ago, Asian American.

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: When you use that term, what does it mean to you?

Kelly: I think of Chinese people.

Vijay: Okay, so when you hear the term Asian American you think of Chinese people?

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: I don’t know, when people kind of separate Asian American, and then if they mean Indian they say Indian. So, and Indian people just kind of assume like Pakistani, Bangladesh, everything put together in one group.

Vijay: Have you ever heard the term “person of color”? 
Kelly: I usually hear that for African Americans.

Vijay: So, if you were going to think of the term “person of color,” would Asian Americans fit into that idea?

Kelly: No.

Vijay: Okay.

Kelly: No.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: Whenever I hear that I just, it’s usually about Black History Month or African Americans. I’ve never heard it for anyone else.

Vijay: Are um, are Asian Americans people of color?

Kelly: I don’t really think so. No, I don’t know. I mean when I think of person of color I think of darker skin and they don’t really have darker skin, well my perception Chinese, Japanese people.

Vijay: Okay. So what about South Asians? We have brown skin and I know some of my cousins have brown brown skin. You know there are some Indians that are extraordinarily dark.

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: Um, do they count as people of color?
Kelly: I mean, I guess if you want to get literal with it I guess, but my perception of person of color would be just African American. And then if someone said darker skin then that would be just okay, you’re describing someone who has dark skin.

Vijay: Oh, okay. Just so the term “person of color” do you think it’s linked to like a history of racism?

Kelly: I think so. Like whenever we’re in school or anything, a person of color always comes up when we’re talking about Black History Month, Martin Luther King, that’s just the term used for African Americans, so I guess that kind of carries over into what are meaning and like thinking a person of color is.

Vijay: And like that specific struggle that like say a fighting for civil rights.

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Vijay: Okay. Do Asian Americans or were Asian Americans affected by that struggle of racism?

Kelly: I mean, Pearl Harbor, again I guess, that’s the only thing I can think of. Civil war time I don’t know anything about like how Asian Americans were affected. Were they affected?

In this exchange it appears that Kelly, like some of the other students in my study, is using a definition of “Asian” that really means East Asian. This informs her understanding of the term Asian American in ways that seem to place South Asians, including herself, outside of the boundaries of the racial group. On a whim, I decided to extend my probing to see if these idiosyncratic demarcations also extended to the term “people of color” and it seems that, for
Kelly, Asian Americans are not a part of this term either. Again, Kelly’s logic is that people of color is a term for people with darker skin and that Asian Americans are really East Asian Americans, who have lighter skin. Upon further questioning, it seems the term people of color is a place holder for Black Americans in Kelly’s mind, as she explains, “Like whenever we’re in school or anything, a person of color always comes up when we’re talking about Black History Month, Martin Luther King, that’s just the term used for African Americans.” Repeatedly, the ghosts of K-12 curricula seem to haunt my participants’ meaning-making process, as Kelly’s ahistorical sensibilities of who counts a person of color do not even allow for her own experience as a South Asian American to fit within the broader American struggle for racial equity.

**Encounters with Racism**

Encountering anti-Asian American racism emerged in every one of my participants’ narratives. I feel that it is important to include these events as a significant finding for several reasons: first, because I am using a framework of identity development (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007) that centralizes the role of external influences in one’s identity development, along with internal contexts; secondly, because Asian American racial tropes are not deployed within White hegemony as value neutral and examining encounters with racism is one way to see the role of these tropes in producing otherness and marginality; and finally, because I feel that these stories from my participants’ lives can help counter mythologies of honorary Whiteness that purport that Asian Americans do not face racism.

**Ramjam:** Uh, I mean I was called a terrorist back in 6th grade. Also, in high school kids would like, they got more and more comfortable I guess with like the terrorist term or the N-word term, and like towards me like they would also like ... they would make jokes as like, “Oh, Osama is your uncle,” or like, “Oh, you’re a terrorist,” like, “Did your family
plant the bomb yet?” or something like that. And it would be like jokes or like I guess not jokes but statements, cruel statements towards me in that sort of type of way.

Ramjam’s memories of being called a terrorist or being teased about having connections to Osama bin Laden speak to the shifting nature of the Asian American racial project. In a post-9-11 world, South Asian-identified and Arab-identified Americans have to contend with broad-scale Islamophobia, from extra screenings at the airport to teasing by their peers in school. Sarah, an Indian American participant in my research study, also shared a memory of Islamophobia impacting her community.

**Vijay:** Umm, did your parents, umm, either your mother or your father ever talk about other races other than Indians?

**Sarah:** Umm, the only story I can remember where they talked about just like race in general and like kind of about the race is when they were at a temple and, umm, they had all people or most of the people at the temple got their cars smashed in because people thought they were Muslim; and then, yeah, that’s the only story she ever told me like regarding race or anything close to that. That’s the only time she talked about it.

Sarah’s story strikes me as a powerful representation of the interchangeability of Asian groups within the dominant American consciousness. This is a serious issue in anti-Asian racism (Chou & Feagin, 2010) and Asian American group members are often mistakenly targeted in hate-incidents. Sarah, who is not Muslim, recalls that her family’s car was vandalized in the parking lot of the Hindu temple because, as her mom shared, “…people thought they were Muslim.”
In the following two examples, Lina and Charlotte share experiences of deep otherness as the result of being racialized as Asian American. Lina recalls several incidents during high school were Forever Foreigner stereotyping seemed to inform her teachers’ perception of her.

**Lina:** So, umm, I thought that was kind of interesting, and it kind of made me mad, you know. And, umm, I’m trying to think like back in the really early times like kindergarten, umm, like the first time that I thought, umm, that people saw - I saw that people might see me as different was I just remember this one comment this boy made saying I had a flat nose. And usually most Caucasian people have really pointy noses, so I was kind of, umm, I was kind of like worried about that as a kid, and although after a while I didn’t really see it as much and so that was good. And, umm, in high school was when, umm, funny things started happening. Like, umm, I went to a private school, a Catholic school, and it was the only one in the area, and so that was predominantly white, but then a huge chunk were exchange students. So, umm, every, umm, every year that I was in high school I got mistaken for being an exchange student.

**Vijay:** Interesting.

**Lina:** And, umm, it’s kind of interesting to see how people treat you and, umm, like there were some teachers who would be like asking me these questions. Like there was this one teacher who asked me if I knew what a Target was, and at the time I didn’t know what she was talking about.

**Vijay:** Yeah.
Lina: And, umm, and then one day I asked her a question in class like during work time, and then she told me, “Wow, your English is really good,” and I’m like, “Oh, umm, I was born here.”

Lina’s ability to casually share multiple incidents where she was treated as a foreign exchange student speaks to a seemingly pervasive otherizing during her high school experience. It is also interesting to note that her narrative began with a time that a boy called attention to her flat nose and then Lina’s story drifts to multiple memories of being otherized by her teachers. This particular narrative chain seems to indicate seamlessness between racism of the biological and phenotypical variety and racism of the xenophobic variety when processed as visceral experiences of otherness by a young adult.

In the next example, Charlotte shares a memory of facing anti-Asian American racism in the form of hegemonic White beauty standards.

Charlotte: Because a lot of the time they’re like, “Oh, she’s so pretty, all the boys will like her.” Um because she’s you know blonde hair, blue eyes, et cetera. And then I remember also that like I think it was in elementary school we were starting to study way, the Civil War, and so, you know, a lot of that was between the whites and the blacks. And so I asked my dad one time, I was just like, “Where would we have been had we been in that time period?” Would we have been with the whites, or would have been slaves, like what would have happened?” So to this day I still you know think about that, like what would I be considered because I’m definitely neither. But, um, I think those are….

Vijay: What did your dad say when you asked him that?
Charlotte: Um, he said don’t even think about it. Cause…. Don’t even think about it because it was like, I don’t know, I just kind of like shrugged it off. I was young and like okay. And then my mom, I asked her when I was a little, you know a little bit older, and then she was like we would have probably been slaves because we look different from everyone else. And I was like, oh, okay.

I find this exchange particularly fascinating because Charlotte’s narrative quickly jumps from being otherized as racially not-White, and therefore not pretty, to her elementary school encounter with the history of American slavery. She recalls trying to place herself in what seemed to have been offered to her as a Black--White binary and is unable to make sense of her own social location using this framework. Her question, “Where would we have been in that time period?” is deeply provocative, as it troubles the limitations of only having a Black and White racial schema. Her parents’ reactions to her questions are equally intriguing, from her father’s suggestion to not think about it, to her mother’s conclusion that Asian Americans would have probably been slaves because “…we look different than everyone else.” As a scholar and a student affairs practitioner, I cannot help but wonder what impact this series of events had on Charlotte’s self-worth and self-perception. She remembers learning that she would not be “pretty” using White beauty standards and then her curiosity about her place in American history leads her parents to conclude that they would have been slaves because they don’t look like anyone else. I cannot help but notice that her parents’ conclusions do not help Charlotte locate and name systemic White racism and, in fact, their conclusions almost seem to problematize their own community, rather than point the finger of accountability at the system of slavery and racial oppression.
The following final example of one of my research participants encountering racism comes from an exchange between Victoria and I about a time she was singled out repeatedly by a White teacher in high school. Victoria shared that, at first, she could not figure out what was happening but that, eventually, she came to understand that she was experiencing racism.

**Vijay:** All right, so when you experienced that sort of series of race-based aggression from your teacher, umm, what do you... how did it make you feel about your own racial identity?

**Victoria:** Well, as I had said before, like when I had first gotten there, like I was very, I was very relieved and I was excited that I was, I was actually Filipino. I was proud. I finally got to the point where I was happy about it. I was actually ... I would boast about it if I could. If the time came, I would gladly boast about being from the Philippines, from the small islands. But when that happened, I kind of... at first I had brushed it off, like everyone’s going to have their maybe ... because she was older, so I figured like how my grandma was in World War II, like she still doesn’t like Japanese people because she had to go into hiding because of it and all of that, so I figured maybe that was the reason. I don’t know why you would pick the Philippines to do any of that for because there was never any really truly like big huge war against another country that the Philippines inflicted, started really, and I didn’t really understand. But as time went on, I was like, am I really that different from everyone else that I deserve this kind of treatment, that I am truly, truly, truly like something, something else, something different from everybody else in this entire room in this entire class that I’m one of the ones that just seem to be like aliens kind of that no one ... like I’m not understood; I’m kind of looked at as like too different kind of?
It seems that, similar to Charlotte, Victoria’s encounter with racism provoked deep questions of self-worth and feelings of extreme otherness. Also in parallel with my other research participants’ experiences with racism, Victoria does not seem to draw larger conclusions about the pervasive and systemic nature of racism as a result of being targeted. Victoria’s repeated questioning of “…am I really that different?” reveals great emotional pain while also locating the problematic of racism on her own difference, rather than her teacher’s bigotry.

In aggregate, these findings raise important questions, which I will take up in my discussion chapter. If young Asian Americans face racism, what tools do they have to resist this racial oppression? The reflections in this findings section speak to the continued role of racism in producing deep doubt and anxiety in people of color. How do these emotions inform one’s meaning-making process in the absence of race consciousness? The participants in my study did not actively identify as Asian American, were not aware of Asian American history or racial formation, and seemed to hold many color-blind racial attitudes. Simultaneously, the narratives above speak to my participants having profoundly Asian American racial experiences with racism, otherness, and marginality. The lacuna between my participants’ mindsets and their lived experience will be discussed at length in Chapter 8 of this dissertation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored my third emergent theme, Asian American racial tropes by examining four key findings: Model Minority typology, Forever Foreigner stereotypes, the Problematics of Panethnicity, and Encounters with Racism. In aggregate, these findings suggest that my subjects’ meaning-making process is deeply affected by their positioning as Asian American in society. Model Minority typology appears to inform many of my participants on what it means to be Asian American while also distancing some of my participants from
identifying as Asian American. The Forever Foreigner stereotype manifested itself throughout my interviews in the glaring ahistoricism of my subjects’ K-12 education. Asian Americans were largely absent from their formal learning across the social sciences and humanities. This elision allowed for counter-factual hegemonic narratives to gain more traction in my subjects’ processes of reflection and identification. The Problematics of Panethnicity appeared in numerous and nuanced ways throughout my interviews, as the conceptual formations of ethnicity, culture, nationality, and race appeared in contradictory and paradoxical modes throughout my participants’ narratives. This conceptual murkiness appeared to serve as a barrier to any coherent racial identification with the idea of Asian American identity. And, finally, painful and jarring Encounters with Racism laced my subjects’ discourses and memories begging the question: how can one live the schism of adhering to color-blind and post-racial ideologies while also facing overt racism concurrently? I will discuss the implications of these findings, in light of my research questions, in Chapter 7 of this dissertation.
CHAPTER 7 – ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This project emerged from my lived experience as a person of color in American society, as a student affairs practitioner, and as an anti-racist educator. Intellectually, I have been fascinated by a shift in the politics of race that I have seen unfold in my own short lifetime. When I first went to college in the mid-1990s, it seemed quite normal for students of color to seek out the campus multicultural resource center as a first point of engagement during their freshman year. We joined organizations based on our racial identities and, eventually, participated in progressive political events, as students of color.

In the early 2000s, after I finished my undergraduate degree and began working in student affairs as a diversity educator, I began hearing Black, Latina/o, or Asian American students say things like, “I don’t identify as [insert racial category here], I’m just [insert name here].” Or, I would hear students of color say that they did not want to get involved at the multicultural center because they didn’t want to limit themselves based on something as nominal as their racial identities. In the last decade, I have witnessed these narratives grow in volume and reach, and now I frequently hear students of color say things like, “I don’t see race and I think if we stop talking about race, it would just go away.” Looking back over this decade and half of observation and reflection, it appears to me that I have witnessed the continued evolution of color-blind racism, an ultra-modern form of racism that has become the central ideology for managing the politics of race in the post-Civil Rights era (Aleinikoff, 1991; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Crenshaw, 1988; Forman, 2004; Gotanda, 1991; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Smith, 2008).
As a student affairs practitioner, I have worked closely with college students, inside and outside of the classroom, for the last ten years. Broadly, I love working with college students because the undergraduate years are often a time of great intellectual, emotional, and spiritual upheaval for students and this instability makes college a prime site for examining individuals’ meaning-making and identity formation processes (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1975; Torres et al., 2009; Renn, 2012). Students of color are no exception to this overall phenomenon and the literature on racial identity development speaks to the dramatic changes in self-concept that individuals of color often experience while attending college (Patton et al., 2007; Kim, 2012; Tanaka, 2002).

This dissertation study is a qualitative investigation of the complex relationship between color-blind racism and racial identity development in college students. I chose to focus my analysis specifically on Asian American college students for several reasons. First, Asian Americans and Asian American college students are deeply understudied (Museus & Kiang, 2009; Pendakur & Pendakur, 2012) and an opportunity to add to this body of research was important to me. Secondly, Asian American subjectivity represents a unique space in which to critically analyze hegemonic racial discourse, due to its nuanced positioning within the American racial schema (Alvarez, 2002; Junn, 2007; & Kim, 1999). Finally, the extant literature on Asian Americans tends to focus on frameworks of ethnicity and acculturation, rather than race and racism, so this research could potentially work to fill a gap in the scholarship (Alvarez, 2002; Chen, LePhuoc, Guzman, Rude, & Dodd, 2006; Kim, 2001; Kim, 2012; Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002).

There are many frameworks through which one can theorize race and racism and I chose Critical Race Theory as my primary theoretical lens for this study. Critical Race Theory
centralizes the role of power and the state in managing and producing racism while also focusing on the agency of people of color in resisting racial oppression (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). Another critical race framework, racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994), challenges us to think of race and racism sociohistorically and links racial projects to hegemony and the redistribution of resources. These ideological frameworks were extremely useful for this study, as I sought to examine the meaning-making process of Asian American students, in light of the existence of the hegemonic ideology and discourse of color-blind racism. Since Critical Race Theory posits that White racial hegemony envelopes both dominant and subordinated group members, it provides a lens through which to ask how discourses that were historically created for White people might also shape the thinking of people of color. Furthermore, as a study of Asian American college students’ racial identity development, this study was also informed by the literature on college student identity development (Abes, 2009; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Patton et al., , 2007; Tanaka, 2002) and Asian American critical theory (Alvarez et al., 2006; Buenavista et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2006; Junn, 2007; Kawaii, 2005; Ng et al., 2007).

I developed one central research question and three subquestions to guide my research process:

How do first-year Asian American students at an urban, private university in the Midwest make meaning of their racial identity in an era of color-blind racism?

- How do these students racially identify and understand that identity in their life stories?
- What do these students learn about race in their home communities and in their first year of college?
• What, if any, tenets of color-blind racism have they internalized and/or contested in their meaning-making process?

I then used a semi-structured, reflexive interview protocol to gather data from nine Asian American college freshmen. I coded the data gathered during these interviews and organized the emergent findings into three themes. Over the last three chapters of this dissertation, I have reviewed my findings as they emerged within these themes: The Ethnicity Paradigm, Color-Blind Racism, and Asian American Racial Tropes. In this final chapter, I will first discuss these findings, as they relate to my three research sub-questions. As I explore the connections between my findings and my research questions, I will also connect my research to the relevant scholarship in an attempt to further the scholarly dialogue and raise opportunities for future research.

**How do these Students Racially Identify and Understand that Identity in their Life Stories?**

Throughout my interview process, I found that the participants held complicated and often contradictory racial identities. Further exploration of their narratives revealed a strong adherence to an ethnic model of racial identification. This exchange, of ethnicity for race, served to explain some of the complexities in the participants’ relationship with race and racial identification. Furthermore, Asian American panethnicity, with all its attendant nuance and limitations, appeared to have a large influence on how the participants understood their ethno-racial identities. In the following section of this chapter, I will analyze two key sets of findings, in relation to my first research sub-question. I will also incorporate relevant scholarship to both deepen my analysis and raise questions for the broader field of knowledge.
Ethnicity as a form of racial identification. In order to understand the broader relationship between color-blind racism and my participants’ racial meaning-making process, it was important to investigate how they presently identified racially and understood that identity in their lives. All of the participants drew heavily from an ethnicity paradigm in forming their racial identities. This was immediately apparent when 8 out of 9 of the participants answered the question, “How do you identify racially?” using ethno-national terms such as “Indian” or “Filipino.”

One participant, Charlotte, answered the race question with the term “Asian,” which, in this instance, I consider to still be part of an ethnic paradigm. Her full answer follows:

Vijay: Um, so how do you identify your race?

Charlotte: My race, Asian I believe. I mean sometimes there’s question about like is the Philippines considered an Asian country or is it like Pacific Islander? But I’m, I say it’s Asian.

Although it is unique and interesting that Charlotte chooses to identify herself racially as Asian, digging deeper into her reasoning seems to suggest that she is still using ethnic thinking to guide this identification. After answering “Asian,” she goes on to ask whether the Philippines is considered part of Asia or if it is in the Pacific Islands. This reasoning seems to suggest that Charlotte is using a form of geographic descent to identify racially, rather than a racial model of collective experience in relation to state power. She appears to be answering Asian because the Philippines is geographically located in Asia, not because she feels there is a common experience of “Asian-ness” that she identifies with.
By using the tools of culture and descent (Omi & Winant, 1997) to construct a racial identity, my participants evidenced a rich sense of ethno-national self-understanding that is considered normative in the scholarship on Asian Americans (Junn, 2007; Kim, 2012). In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I shared numerous examples of the participants using an ethnicity model to process racialized experiences. Kim (2012) attempts to explain this by arguing, “Asian Americans who live in predominantly Asian or mixed neighborhoods have greater exposure to ethnic activities and experience more ethnic pride and knowledge of their cultural heritage” (p. 145). Kim (2012) also writes:

For some Asian Americans, particularly the immigrant generation, the most pressing challenge and objective is related to surviving and establishing themselves in the new country, assimilating as quickly as possible into mainstream America. Contemplating their minority status may seem like a type of navel gazing for this group, one they can ill-afford. Focusing on their personal [ethnic] rather than social [racial] identity may also be due to the fact that most Asian American immigrants come to the United States after their formative years when their personal identity and self-concept have solidified. Therefore the social political climate and racism in the United States may have less of an effect on their personal identities than on those Asian Americans who are coming of age in the White dominant society. (p. 141)

I find Kim’s (2012) analysis to be particularly poignant for my study because all of my participants were 2nd generation Asian Americans, raised by an immigrant generation that might have faced the pressures Kim (2012) describes above. However, Kim (2012) seems to fall short in her explanation, in relation to my participant groups, when she states that Asian Americans
who grow up in America might have a different experience than their parents, due to direct encounters with White dominance in their formative years. The participants definitely encountered Whiteness and racism in their formative years, yet still seemed to adhere closely to the ethnicity paradigm. A sociohistorical examination is necessary to understand this phenomenon.

While Kim’s (2012) explanation of the salience of the ethnicity paradigm for Asian Americans focuses on intra-community dynamics, Omi and Winant (1997) offer a different explanation. They argue that the ethnicity paradigm has been a dominant framework for managing racial difference in America since the early 20th century. Using a sociohistorical analysis, Omi and Winant (1997) track the evolution of this paradigm from early assimilationist models to its current neoconservative form. While Kim (2012) seems to argue that Asian Americans encounter the ethnicity model inside Asian or mixed communities, Omi and Winant (1997) theorize that this ethno-national model exists much more broadly and appears to inform the fundamental way in which race is managed in contemporary American society. The salience of the ethnicity paradigm at a societal level seems to appear in Charlotte’s explanation of the difference between “dominating White” versus “predominantly White.”

Vijay: Hmm, tell me about that distinction, the difference between predominately white versus dominating white.

Charlotte: Um, dominating white being like everyone is white. Like, everyone um you know left their culture at home and joined into the American culture today. Um, that, or yeah that’s dominantly white. And then predominantly white is like um, like what we have now. So there are some people who still are very… have their cultures from the
country they came from very strong, or is very strong in the United States. Um, whereas some people have kind of just like meshed more into what like have settled with just being white. Um, for example like I have some friends, I’ll be like, “Oh yeah, I’m proud to say I’m 100 Filipino.” And then for them they’ll be like, yeah I’m Swedish, German, Irish, et cetera, and I’ll be like, okay. I mean some of them are proud, like my boyfriend, for example, he’s Swedish. He’s mostly Swedish, um, but like he doesn’t even know you know what the rest of him is. Which it doesn’t really bother me. I’m just like, interesting. So, I kind of think like who do they identify with if I identify with being Filipino? Does that make sense?

Charlotte appears to directly use the tools of culture and descent to explain that America is no longer an assimilationist society, but one that values cultural pluralism. Her ability to maintain her Filipino culture in her analysis is a testament to the lack of racial dominance in American society. Similar aspects of the ethnicity paradigm appear to be at work in Natasha’s thinking in the following exchange.

**Vijay:** So, so if they pride themselves on their diversity, why doesn’t the curriculum in the high school have any, like have information about the Asian American experience?

**Natasha:** I don’t think people care. Like they, they do do things. They do like have like, they have the Heritage Night for a reason, and they have like all these like…. They have just a lot of things to like show your culture, like they have different clubs that are like you know like the African American Club, like things like to like talk about those things.

Natasha is able to explain her high school’s lack of Asian American curricula, an issue connected to both structure and power, by pointing to the school’s investment in a “Heritage Night”
program or their investment in ethnic student clubs. These examples, along with many others from Chapter 4, speak to the hegemonic nature of the ethnicity paradigm. The ethno-national tools of culture and descent that are central to this model serve as a possessive investment in personal identity to the obfuscation of social realities like institutional racism, structural oppression, and the history of White dominance in American society.

Bonilla-Silva (2006) writes, “…color-blind racism has rearticulated elements of traditional liberalism…for racially illiberal goals” (p. 7). When viewed through a Critical Race Theory lens, the participants’ broad adherence to the ethnicity paradigm, over a racial schema, primes them with the tools of culture and descent, along with the logic of cultural pluralism. My first research sub-question was concerned with how my participants identified racially and how they understood that identity in their life experience. Adhering to an ethnicity model (traditional liberalism) appears to provide the participants a foundation for a subsequent investment in color-blind racism (racial illiberalism) by offering them a rich sense of personal identity at the expense of an understanding of group relationships within the context of state power, history, and hegemony.

**Problematic panethnicity.** While the participants all had strong ethnic experiences that informed their personal identities, it also appeared that the ethnicity paradigm served as a barrier to their racial identification as Asian American. As I noted in Chapter 4, only one of the participants actually identified themselves using the language “Asian American”, but when I probed more deeply, Lina seemed to be using ethno-national frameworks to identify herself as both “Asian” (as a result of her cultural heritage) and “American” (as a result of her acculturation in America). Lina was not using the term Asian American with respect to its specific racial connotations, historical legacy, and current group implications.
Beyond the ethnicity paradigm serving as a barrier to the participants identifying as Asian American, other phenomena appeared to be at play in creating this lack of salience. The participants seemed to be quite confused as to whether they even qualified as Asian Americans or not, due to the problematic nature of Asian American panethnicity. Many of the participants appeared to struggle with the boundary issue (where figurative “Asia” stops and starts) of whether they were “Asian” or not, while others weren’t quite sure what the term Asian American meant and, therefore, rejected this label based on misunderstanding. One emblematic example of this ethno-racial confusion occurred during my interview with Kelly.

**Vijay:** Um, you said your, your roommate is Asian?

**Kelly:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** What specific ethnicity, if you don’t mind sharing?

**Kelly:** Vietnamese I think?

**Vijay:** Vietnamese?

**Kelly:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** So when you, when you think about your Vietnamese roommate, do you consider yourself, you and your roommate, part of the same racial group?

**Kelly:** No, no. I don’t know; I always consider that Asian separate from like South Asians.

**Vijay:** Oh, okay. So like, so South Asian is different that Southeast Asian.

**Kelly:** I guess, yeah.
Vijay: Or East Asian.

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: I don’t know? Just how, I don’t know; how I’ve lived by. I mean no one’s ever considered Indians as Asians really. Since I was little, like people never knew that was part of Asia, so I never really considered myself as Asian. People thought I was in the Middle East, so I have no idea about that, but I just kind of considered India Pakistan, like one area, and then Asian is Chinese. The first thing that people think of when they say, when they say Asian, is probably Chinese or Japanese, so that’s probably why.

Vijay: Yeah, I agree. That’s pretty interesting, isn’t it; when you say Asian people think Chinese or Japanese.

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Vijay: Even though like the Middle East is in Asia, Russia is in Asia, right.

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Vijay: Um so, so there’s clearly something going on there.

Kelly: Yeah.

[Later in the interview…]

Vijay: Hmm. Um, you used the term a few seconds ago, Asian American.

Kelly: Yeah.
Vijay: When you use that term, what does it mean to you?

Kelly: I think of Chinese people.

Vijay: Okay, so when you hear the term Asian American you think of Chinese people?

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: I don’t know, when people kind of separate Asian American, and then if they mean Indian they say Indian. So, and Indian people just kind of assume like Pakistani, Bangladesh, everything put together in one group.

Vijay: Have you ever heard the term “person of color”?

Kelly: I usually hear that for African Americans.

Vijay: So, if you were going to think of the term “person of color,” would Asian Americans fit into that idea?

Kelly: No.

Vijay: Okay.

Kelly: No.

Vijay: How come?

Kelly: Whenever I hear that I just, it’s usually about Black History Month or African Americans. I’ve never heard it for anyone else.
Vijay: Are um, are Asian Americans people of color?

Kelly: I don’t really think so. No, I don’t know. I mean when I think of person of color I think of darker skin and they don’t really have darker skin, well my perception Chinese, Japanese people.

Vijay: Okay. So what about South Asians? We have brown skin and I know some of my cousins have brown brown skin. You know there are some Indians that are extraordinarily dark.

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: Um, do they count as people of color?

Kelly: I mean, I guess if you want to get literal with it I guess, but my perception of person of color would be just African American. And then if someone said darker skin then that would be just okay, you’re describing someone who has dark skin.

Vijay: Oh, okay. Just so the term “person of color” do you think it’s linked to like a history of racism?

Kelly: I think so. Like whenever we’re in school or anything, a person of color always comes up when we’re talking about Black History Month, Martin Luther King, that’s just the term used for African Americans, so I guess that kind of carries over into what are meaning and like thinking a person of color is.

Vijay: And like that specific struggle that like say a fighting for civil rights.

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.
Vijay: Okay. Do Asian Americans or were Asian Americans affected by that struggle of racism?

Kelly: I mean, Pearl Harbor, again I guess, that’s the only thing I can think of. Civil war time I don’t know anything about like how Asian Americans were affected. Were they affected?

In these two sections of my interview with Kelly, many of the problematics of Asian American panethnicity seem to be at work. First, Kelly appears to be using the term Asian as a synonym for East Asian, which is a common slippage. While this is common, it is also problematic, because it places Kelly, a South Asian, outside the figurative boundaries of “Asia.” Then, later in the interview, Kelly shares that she also thinks of East Asians, specifically Chinese Americans, when she hears the term Asian American. It seems that the slippage about what countries are in Asia carries over to who is included in the term Asian American. This is doubly problematic because Kelly, in response to this logic, does not consider herself Asian American because Indians aren’t generally thought of as Asian. Finally, additional probing on my part seemed to reveal that Kelly also locates Asian Americans outside the umbrella term “people of color”. When asked why, she shares that the term people of color makes her think of African Americans because of their shared history of racism and resistance. Her lack of knowledge about the Asian American experience appears to produce both a dis-identification with the racial category and the false conclusion that Asian Americans do not have a history of racial oppression and resistance.

In her 2008 chapter on the recent challenges to Asian American panethnicity, Espiritu writes:
The emergence of the pan-Asian entity in the late 1960s may be one of the most significant political developments in Asian American civic engagement…The post-1965 immigration has fueled population growth and led to greater visibility for Asian Americans, but their changing demographics has also complicated their civic engagement….As reviewed in this paper, such internal diversities have made it more difficult for Asian Americans to speak with a unified political voice. Thus Asian American panethnicity has been an efficacious but contested category, encompassing not only cultural differences but also social, political, and economic inequalities. (p. 134)

Espiritu’s (2008) characterization of Asian American panethnicity as “efficacious but contested” is a strong capture of the tension found in many of my participants’ narratives. As a product of the intensely heterogenous post-1965 immigration pattern, my second-generation Asian American research participants struggled to see the utility in panethnicity, possibly as a result of cultural, social, political, and economic difference.

Junn and Masuoka (2008) add depth to Espiritu’s analysis in their study of Asian American political group consciousness. They write:

In addition to the internal diversity among Asian Americans, the relatively high levels of social and residential integration could also mitigate racial identity formation. They are more likely than blacks and Latinos to be economically integrated with whites. In particular, high average levels of formal education drive a similarly high degree of occupational status and income earnings. Taken together, these resources produce a population that is less likely to reside in ethnic enclaves and more likely than other
minority groups to live in racially integrated neighborhoods and attend racially diverse schools. (p. 730)

The authors proceed to argue that these structural factors complicate not only Asian American subjects’ relationship to their own racial group identity but to the larger sociopolitical identity of people of color. Kelly’s inability to find common ground between her Vietnamese roommate and her own experience as an Indian American speaks to the possible current limitations of the Asian American racial category that come about when an investment is not made in actively building a political group consciousness. The ultimate outcome of this lack of racial awareness can be seen in Kelly’s thinking that Asian Americans might not be people of color, as this conclusion seems to emerge directly from her misperception that Asian Americans have not faced structural racism in the American past. This finding raises the possibility for future scholarly study, as there is little written about how educators can successfully conscientize Asian Americans so they identify with the panethnic racial label and find solidarity as people of color in a broader anti-racist struggle.

In conclusion, the students in this study identify in numerous ways, all which seem to be profoundly shaped by the ethnicity paradigm. This supplanting of race with ethnicity advances neoliberal hegemony by centering the participants on individual, cultural experiences, rather than collective, racial experiences. Furthermore, the tools of culture and descent serve to obfuscate the historical and present role of state power and systemic racism in producing inequity for Asian Americans. Secondly, the participants’ racial identification was further complicated due to the problematics of Asian American panethnicity. None of the participants actually identified with the racial label “Asian American,” instead opting for ethno-cultural or national identification. Deeper investigation seemed to suggest that a complicated understanding of who counts as
“Asian” seemed to also serve as a barrier to some of my participants identifying as Asian American.

**What do these Students Learn about Race in their Home Communities and in their First Year of College?**

The research participants appeared to have learned an enormous amount about race in their life experiences thus far. Their learning seemed to occur in numerous formal and informal ways at school, home and everywhere between. In the following section of this chapter, I will review three key sets of findings that connect to this research question: diversity and cultural pluralism, encountering anti-Asian racism, and the role of Asian American racial tropes. I will also examine related scholarship in an attempt to enrich my discussion and unearth challenges for future research.

**Diversity and cultural pluralism.** The students in my study appeared to have been taught a broad commitment to the idea of diversity and cultural pluralism that profoundly shaped their thinking on race. In many of my interviews, the participants shared their beliefs that American society values racial diversity, which they view as important in their life and as a possible “cure” for racism. In the following exchange with Natasha where she is describing why she chose to apply to The University, it appears that being in a diverse setting is important to her because of how she feels in these settings.

*Natasha:* …And I did actually apply because of race, because I saw The University was diverse. When I went to the other schools there were only white people, like literally. There were two other Asian kids in like a room of 500 kids during like the open house.
And then the other school too also had like a couple Asian kids. And I did notice those things. I just like I wanted to go to a school where I felt welcomed almost…

This sentiment about how diverse settings seemed more comfortable appeared in several of my participants’ narratives and demonstrates a value placed on racial diversity as a positive thing. While this was not surprising, the participants in my study seemed to carry their investment in diversity to another level when they shared their thinking that diversity is important because it solves racial issues. For example, earlier in that same interview with Natasha, the following exchange occurred:

**Vijay**: Hmm. Did uh…. Did you ever experience any racism, identity based racism in uh, in high school?

**Natasha**: No, my school was pretty diverse.

Natasha seems to be equating a diverse space with a space that cannot contain racism. This same logic appeared in many of participants’ reflections where homogenous spaces were inherently problematized for their lack of diversity. Using this logic, if a space is not diverse, it must be racist.

The participants in my study appeared to hold a strong adherence to the notion of cultural pluralism, possibly as a by-product of the ethnicity paradigm’s focus on ethno-cultural identity. While their commitment to diversity might appear to be laudable, their focus on diverse inputs over equitable outcomes represents some serious challenges for movements of racial justice. Ladson-Billings (2004), writes:
…Emphasis on human sameness fails to reveal the huge power differentials that exist between the White middle class and other groups in U.S. society. By acknowledging the existence of various groups while simultaneously ignoring the issues of power and structural inequity, liberal multiculturalism functions as a form of appeasement. …This thinking fails to recognize the structural and symbolic practices that militate against the ability of the poor, women, and non-White ethnic and cultural groups to access (and succeed in) the society. (p. 53)

Ladson-Billings’s (2004) poignant critique of liberal multiculturalism is helpful in understanding the limits, and dangers, of my participants’ reductive adherence to a politic of diversity that obscures issues of “power and structural inequity.” An example of this problem can be seen in Victoria’s reflection on why she does not spend time with the Filipino community.

Victoria: They like to separate themselves and be their own clique, I guess, and I’m ... and it’s like an exclusive one, and I was never one for that exclusive stuff. Like anyone can come out with me, but you guys can go do your thing together by yourselves and I’ll just go out with a big cluster of different people that are every race, every personality you could possibly imagine, just people I liked hanging out with instead of just a group of people based out of, based out of your ethnicity, I guess, so yeah.

Using the liberal politic of diversity-as-progress, Victoria is able to problematize the Filipino community for valuing their in-group interaction. Rather than seeing this enclave investment as a strength, Victoria has a narrow focus on diversity as an end goal and it seems to limit her ability to understand why racialized communities might want to stick together, possibly as a strategic response to structural racism and historic exclusion.
Over the course of my research, it also appeared that my participants had learned to value liberal cultural pluralism through their participation in high school clubs or ethnic fair-type events. Earlier in this chapter, I shared an exchange where one of my participants, Natasha, offered her school’s investment in a “Heritage Night” program and an African American student organization as a response to why they don’t have any Asian American presence in their curricula. My research seemed to uncover the role of these cultural events and organizations in high school settings as being one of indoctrinating students in a liberal identity politic that emphasized individual cultural expression while masking race, power, and structure. In contrast to these findings, Alvarez (2002) writes that these very same organizations and events at the collegiate level might have the opposite effect:

For Asian American students who enter college operating primarily from a Conformity worldview, the full spectrum of Asian American student organizations, student protests, Asian American studies courses, and cultural celebrations may be catalysts for a reexamination of their color-blind views on race. (p. 37)

While Alvarez goes beyond student organizations and cultural celebrations, by including protests and coursework in his argument, it is important for student affairs practitioners and researchers to note that unless cultural organizations and celebrations are crafted with intention at the collegiate level, they can simply reproduce the hegemonic politics of ethnicity that appear to be salient in my participants’ high school experiences.

A powerful example of the role of liberal multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, and ethnic celebrations in obscuring the reality of race and power can be found in one part of Victoria’s narrative. In the following passages, Victoria explains how her high school’s “Ethnic Bazaar”
event helped her feel ethnic pride for the first time. While this is an admirable outcome, the event also seemed to inculcate Victoria in a “politics of sameness” that Ladson-Billings (2004) warns us about.

**Victoria:** But, umm, at my first high school at the all girls school, there was this thing called Ethnic Bazaar where people showed off their ethnicity. It was like one of the best things that could have possibly happened because then I realized that it doesn’t matter that I’m Filipino. There’s other, there’s other races and they’re proud too, and it would be a shame to hide it, I guess. And so we got to do our little ethnic traditional dance, and everyone thought it was cool. I just never thought of it like that when we were younger that everyone, all of the whites and the Chaldeans, they all know each other’s traditions and they generally have the same traditions; and then when something else comes along, it could actually be cool that you don’t fit the mold. …So when I got into high school, I quickly got into that group because I had ... there was a senior and I had played basketball with her for the Filipino basketball league, so I knew her before I came in, and she had put together this group of Filipinos to do this dance; and I absolutely, I absolutely loved the experience because I didn’t… I felt like I didn’t have to be embarrassed by it anymore.

A little later in the interview, we were talking about the frequency at which people come up to Victoria and ask her, “What are you?”

**Vijay:** Well, let me ask you. Why do you think people are coming up to you, walking up to you and saying, “What are you?”
Victoria: I think they’re curious because I’ve been told that I look mixed, mixed between different ethnicities, and they find it interesting to find out … I think it calms the curiosity just … I’d rather you just come up and ask it than just stare or like …

[Laughter]

Victoria: Like I don’t feel awkward about it anymore. I just kind of… it’s kind of like a game to me now. Like I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but I think that’s just my personality that it’s just, it’s just interesting to see how people view me… or as like they’re actually seeing, they’re seeing some sort of similarity to some different race. And to me that’s just like proving that we’re all just the same. We’re all the same. We all have the same ... We all have two eyes and a nose and 10 fingers, maybe a couple more if you’re one of those lucky ones. And so, I’ve accepted it a lot easier after high school after that Ethnic Bazaar because I understand that it’s… you are curious when you meet someone what ethnicity they are. Even if they are white, like are you Polish? Are you Irish? Are you German, English? And I think it’s just human nature to be curious about what… someone’s background.

In this case, the cultural celebration event truly seemed to engender a “politics of sameness” that Ladson-Billings (2004) cautions against. Victoria explicitly names the Ethnic Bazaar in helping her understand that “we all have two eyes and a nose” – a conclusion that shields her from seeing critical differences in the way people are racialized, or not, through the question, “What are you?” Alvarez (2002) does not fully capture these problematic outcomes when endorsing cultural celebration events at the collegiate level. In aggregate, these findings represent one
aspect of what the participants learned about race growing up and offer a challenge for both the scholarship and the practice of racial justice.

**Encountering Anti-Asian racism: Learning otherness.** A second important facet in what the participants learned about race growing up appeared to be located in their encounters with anti-Asian racism. Research on Asian American racial identity formation notes the generative role of experiencing racism in subjects’ development of a racial self-concept (Alvarez, 2002; Kim, 2012; Sue et al., 2007). My own research findings seem to support this overall observation while also offering areas for further exploration.

Many of the participants shared experiences of encountering anti-Asian racism in their early childhoods and adolescent years. The following example from Charlotte is representative of the broader array of narratives gathered during my research.

**Charlotte:** Because a lot of the time they’re like, “Oh, she’s so pretty, all the boys will like her.” Um because she’s you know blonde hair, blue eyes, et cetera. And then I remember also that like I think it was in elementary school we were starting to study war, the Civil War, and so, you know, a lot of that was between the whites and the blacks. And so I asked my dad one time, I was just like, “Where would we have been had we been in that time period?” Would we have been with the whites, or would have been slaves, like what would have happened?” So to this day I still you know think about that, like what would I be considered because I’m definitely neither. But, um, I think those are….

**Vijay:** What did your dad say when you asked him that?

**Charlotte:** Um, he said don’t even think about it. Cause…. Don’t even think about it because it was like, I don’t know, I just kind of like shrugged it off. I was young and like
okay. And then my mom, I asked her when I was a little, you know a little bit older, and then she was like we would have probably been slaves because we look different from everyone else. And I was like, oh, okay.

In this reflection about her high school years, Charlotte’s encounter with hegemonic White beauty standards seemed to trigger another memory from an earlier part of her life. She shared her story about wondering whether she would have been considered White or a slave and, after I probed, also shared her parents’ response to her questions. Her father’s suggestion to simply not think about it does little to inform Charlotte’s understanding of the Asian American presence in the US past, while her mother’s response manages to name otherness without directly naming White, institutional racism.

While I gathered many examples from my interviews of the participants being targeted by racism, I wanted to focus on this one because it captures a theme that appeared for all of the participants. Charlotte’s encounter with anti-Asian racism seemed to have produced otherness without producing further knowledge of racial identity, systemic racism, and White power. This is significant because it challenges and complicates the current, limited, scholarship on Asian American racial identity development.

enough to merit an explicit look at how the Helms’s (2001) model can be intentionally applied to the Asian American community. Over the course of the article, Alvarez (2002) addresses each of Helms’s (2001) six stages and how student affairs practitioners can utilize a “challenge and support” strategy to empower Asian American college students as they experience: Conformity, Dissonance, Immersion, Emersion, and Internalization, and Integrative Awareness.

In discussing the stages of Conformity and Dissonance specifically, Alvarez (2002) notes the role of racism in potentially producing racial awareness and further critical thinking. Alvarez (2002) writes:

A challenge for Asian American students who operate primarily from a Conformity worldview may occur as their color-blind perspective begins to conflict with college experiences that suggest that racial differences exist and that people may be treated differentially on the basis of race. In particular, events and activities that underscore “racial conflicts” (ethnoviolence and harassment) may be a direct challenge to a person’s need to maintain a racial view of the world as harmonious and conflict-free (Alvarez and Kimura, 2001). Given that the Conformity status is characterized by an individual’s assimilation of white cultural norms, students may also be challenged by experiences that suggest that whites still regard them as Asian Americans, despite their best efforts at assimilation… In effect, a primary challenge to a person’s Conformity worldview may be the growing recognition that race, particularly one’s own, is salient. (p. 36)

And, later, when discussing the Dissonance stage, Alvarez (2002) notes:

The development of the Dissonance status of racial identity begins to evolve as Asian American students continue to encounter experiences that suggest that race may be
related to the differential treatment of both themselves and others. As their color-blind racial views are challenged, students may begin to question their idealization of white individuals and white culture as well as their denigration of Asian Americans and Asian culture… Conversely, events that begin to challenge a student’s idealization of white individuals and white culture—such as witnessing acts of overt white racism, being the object of racial stereotypes, and gaining an awareness of Eurocentrism—may be equally powerful catalysts (Alvarez and Kimura, 2001). In effect, college itself may be a Dissonance inducing environment that underscores the salience of race and perhaps the value of identifying oneself in racial terms (Alvarez and Yeh, 1999). (p. 37)

Broadly, the participants each had experiences with racism that did not seem to produce the changes Alvarez (2002) describes in this article. Perhaps, since Alvarez (2002) is writing about college students in specific, the participants’ experiences with racism pre-college do not have the potential to produce the same critical discernment and shift in self-concept. However, at the time when I conducted my interviews, all of the participants had completed one quarter of their first year at The University, and Alvarez’s suggestion that “college itself” might engender shifts in racial consciousness and the awareness of Whiteness and racism does not seem to be accurate for the students in my study, at least not yet. It is important for me to note that Alvarez (2002) does acknowledge color-blind racial attitudes in his scholarship, however, he might not be accounting for color-blind racism as a hegemonic system in his theorization that encountering racism will produce race consciousness. I will investigate this important difference later in this chapter, in the research sub-question on color-blind racism.

Similarly, Kim (2012) offers a stage-model of racial identity development for Asian Americans. Rather than Conformity and Dissonance, Kim’s (2012) stage one and two are
labeled Ethnic Identification and White Identification. While I will deal with this racial identity development model in greater detail later in this chapter, it is important to note that Kim’s (2012) third stage, titled Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, involves an awareness of racism. Kim (2012) argues that:

This transformation begins with a realistic assessment of Asian Americans’ social position and a clear realization of the existence of societal blocks and the futility of trying to “pass” or to strive for acceptance within the White world. The awareness of White racism also provides alternative perspectives for Asian Americans which allow them to reinterpret their lives and lets them know that things could be different. (p. 147)

While my research participants all seemed aware of White racism, in that they had firsthand experience of it, they also did not “reinterpret their lives” in response to receiving anti-Asian racism, as Kim (2012) suggests. It is of note that both Alvarez (2002) and Kim (2012) suggest that there must be certain other conditions present to engender transformative change and that simply encountering racism alone does not serve as a catalyst for reorganizing one’s worldview. As scholars and practitioners think through what these other conditions are, my research seems to suggest that the active presence of color-blind racism must be taken into consideration when designing educational experiences for Asian Americans. From examining the narratives of the students in this study, matriculation to college, the existence of culture clubs and celebrations, and an awareness of racism do not seem to produce a critical understanding of the White power structure or a racial ideology to inform one’s self-concept.

One possible explanation for this lack of racial identity development in response to racism could be found in the nature of many anti-Asian microaggressions. In their 2007 study of
Asian American participants’ response to racial microaggressions, Sue et al. found that, as a whole, their participants found racial microaggressions to be negative and detrimental to themselves. While the researchers conclude that anti-Asian racial microaggressions must be taken seriously, they also note some unique patterns of murkiness in their participants’ response to experiencing numerous racial incidents. Sue et al. (2007) write:

In general, it appears that most of the Asian American participants experienced psychological conflict and distress because of several dilemmas they faced…First, they remarked that it was often difficult to determine whether a microaggression occurred. Were they being oversensitive or misreading the remarks or questions? …Second, most of the racial microaggressions that occurred came from peers, neighbors, friends or authority figures…Third, many expressed severe conflict about whether to respond to microaggressions given that most were unintentional and outside the level of awareness of the perpetrator. (p. 78)

Much like the participants in my study, Sue et al.’s (2007) research participants’ experience of racism was often through microaggressive channels like the question, “Where are you from?” or “What are you?” While undoubtedly racist, these microaggressions seem to produce “dilemmas” in their victims, according to Sue et al’s (2007) research, which might be a possible explanation for why experiencing anti-Asian racism did not seem to linearly produce strong racial identification or race consciousness in my participants. Further examination of the role of these dilemmas in Asian Americans’ meaning-making process might reveal more about how individuals shape their self-concept in response to racism.
Asian American racial tropes. My third and final emergent finding for the question, “What do these students learn about race in their home communities and in their first year of college?” is tied to a constellation of racial tropes that shape Asian American racial identity: model minority typology, honorary Whiteness, and forever foreigner status. Together, these interlocking racial schemas form the racial project (Omi & Winant, 1996) of post-1965 Asian American racial identity and they seem to have had a profound effect on what the participants learned about their racial identities in their lives thus far.

The research participants had a range of reactions to the model minority archetype. During my interview with Charlotte, she made the following reference:

Charlotte: And like my… actually my Filipino friends and I joke that a B is an Asian fail, or something.

Later in that interview, I asked Charlotte explicitly if she felt the model minority stereotype was harmful to Asian Americans.

Charlotte: I don’t think so, because like you said, the model minority, which is like, I think that’s why I have like not had really any trouble accepting it because I’m like that’s actually a good way to be, you know, quiet, respectful. Um, I can be quiet, believe it or not. Um, you know, hard working and like I do feel the benefits from it and so it’s like, why not kind of thing.

Other participants had the opposite reaction as Charlotte, reacting against the stereotype and distancing themselves from the idea of being Asian American as a result of it. In the following exchange, Natasha and I are talking about whether she identifies herself as Asian American.
Natasha: Hmm. I don’t know? I feel like if I was, if I was going to identify myself, or just like in a broad term like Asian Americans, when I think of that, would just be that… Like, I just, I can’t help thinking of stereotypes or like just like the idea that Asian Americans, like what….

Vijay: Like what stereotypes come to mind?

Natasha: Like strict, like serious kind of like. I don’t really know that many things about Asian Americans actually.

Natasha reveals knowing very little about Asian Americans, but also names that she is aware of stereotypes. In the narrative above, she manages to name one stereotype before closing down the dialogue that Asian Americans are “strict.” This aspect of the model minority schema appeared several times in my research and often served as a point of distance between the participants and their willingness to identify as Asian American. In sum, whether through internalization or rejection, model minority typology appeared to have strong influence on what the subjects learned about their racial identities.

Wong and Halgin’s 2006 study offers some insight into my findings, as they suggest that individual Asian Americans’ internalization or contestation of the model minority stereotype might be linked to each person’s relationship to the Asian American racial group identity. Wong and Halgin (2006) write:

Students whose self-identity is intertwined with group identity are proud to be perceived as members of the model group. However, students who view the label negatively expressed dislike for being tied to a group image. They do not like having expectations
pinned on them, believing that such labeling marginalizes them from mainstream society and also interferes with their wish to be perceived as individuals. (p. 40)

Wong and Halgin’s (2006) conclusions might help explain the varying relationships to the model minority archetype found in the participants’ narratives in my study, as the students held a variety of stances when it came to their identification with the Asian American racial group.

Maddox et al.’s (2008) study of the role of realistic threat in non-Asian Americans’ response to model minority typology might raise another possible interpretation of my findings. Maddox et al. (2008) attempt to probe how a single stereotype can engender both positive and negative responses from out-group members and they conclude:

In other words, the belief that Asian Americans or other model minorities are intelligent and ambitious may actually be considered negative when such traits are associated with negative outcomes for oneself or one’s group (i.e., fewer jobs, poorer grades). (p. 86)

Maddox et al. (2008) argue that the model minority stereotype incites both “positive” associations and negative associations, due to the possibility of realistic threat in non-Asian Americans. My own research findings suggest that a similar analysis might be fruitful if conducted within the Asian American community, as the dual-response phenomena could be possible for Asian American group members, in their varying responses to the model minority archetype. For some Asian Americans, the stereotype might represent a realistic threat and create distance between them and the Asian American racial group, whereas others might focus more on the “positive” aspects of the archetype and the stereotype might serve as a pathway to greater identification as Asian American. My own research, combined with Wong and Halgin’s (2006) and Maddux et al.’s (2008) findings, point to the need for further exploration of the
complex dynamics of racial group identification and stereotype response in the scholarship on Asian American racial identity.

Model minority typology also appeared to affect the participants by positioning them as *honorary Whites*. This deracinating effect is mentioned often in the scholarship on the model minority stereotype (Buenavista et al., 2009; Inkelas, 2003; Junn, 2007; Sue et al., 2007; Wu, 1995) and appeared in the participants’ narratives in complex ways, particularly in their relationship to affirmative action discourses. I asked one formal question in my interview protocol about affirmative action and the participants’ responses to this question often revealed a pattern of contradictory tension. As a group, their narratives emphasize an ethic of fairness and a value on diversity, which makes sense given their strong adherence to the politics of cultural pluralism. However, they also seemed challenged by race-conscious affirmative action policy that did not seem to include them and, therefore, seemed unfair to them. Much of the participant group identified as working and lower-middle class, which may have further complicated their responses, as their access to a college education was already limited by their families’ tight budgets.

Although affirmative action came up in each interview, I will share two emblematic examples in this analysis in an attempt to better examine the relationship between race, class, and meaning-making occurring in the participants’ narratives. The first example is from my interview with Ramjam and the second, lengthier example, is from my interview with Kelly.

1. **Ramjam**: Uh, everyone as anyone in general? Umm, the equal opportunity, no, because, umm, let’s say like a kid was born in like a working family rather than like a kid that was born in like upper class family, like he… the upper class kid would have more resources;
he would have more you know resources and like the money to like get out there and do what he or she wanted to do or like, you know, like have a better education possibly, go to a better school with like actual computers or something rather than like a kid working and growing up in a working family, like maybe their school didn’t have computers or lap tops they can take home and maybe they don’t give them the same like assignments to like, you know, use the Internet as much because they probably didn’t have Internet at home, so I feel like not everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

**Vijay:** How about race, do you think race could give one person more opportunities or less opportunities?

**Ramjam:** Umm, yeah, possibly because, I mean, I feel like there was a kid, he was Native American in my school in high school, and whatever like college he applied to he usually got in. Whether or not his scores were like off the charts or if it was mediocre at least, he would get in because he was Native American and he would get such a good scholarship as well rather than an Asian kid like me applying to like Brown University, for instance. Like with mine and his ACT score being the same and with my GPA being stronger, he would get in and I would not because I mean ... not that it happened but I saw that happen with a friend as well so ...

2. (This excerpt comes from a conversation in which Kelly is discussing not being able to attend her top-choice school and her frustration with having to attend The University.)

**Vijay:** Okay, um, when you…. When you ended up having to choose The University because of finances, uh how did it make you feel?
Kelly: Oh I hated it. I mean, like I felt like academically like going to school shouldn’t be about like how much money you have or anything, it should just be if you have the academics to get in, like you should be able to get in without a problem. Because I knew people from my high school, a majority of the people went to [the state school] and there were people who were from Hispanic origin who definitely did not have like the academics that would have gave them like the huge scholarships that they got. Like they’re basically going like for free.

Vijay: Wow.

Kelly: But it’s because of their nationality that they’re able to go, so that kind of really upset me about that.

Vijay: Did that feel unfair to you?

Kelly: Yeah, definitely.

Vijay: Um, do you remember talking with your parents uh about that unfairness?

Kelly: Yeah, I told my, I mentioned it to my dad and…

Vijay: What did he say?

Kelly: …he was pretty mad about that too, but he can’t, he can’t really do anything so.

Vijay: What was the conversation like when he was mad about it and you were talking with him?

Kelly: Well, I mean, I just told him how this one person at our school, she’s of half Hispanic origin who definitely was not like up to the par as many as other people were
who are going to [the state school] and who got in, but she got this crazy awesome scholarship and her dad makes a lot of money anyway, so I just felt like she shouldn’t be getting the scholarship to go there. And he agreed and he was like, he told me that that’s unfair as well, but that’s how, you know, the whole college system works I guess, so.

Vijay: Why uh, why do you think that uh, that [the state school] has that system?

Kelly: I don’t, I don’t know, I just knew it as like…. Everyone knows it as a school that doesn’t give you a lot of money, as a public school. And I guess from what I’ve heard from other people say that they don’t give a lot of money and the people who get money are ones from minority groups who are not, I don’t know, not represented as much.

Vijay: Okay, so it’s about like representation?

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: What do you think about that?

Kelly: That sucks!

Vijay: Did you, around that time when you were applying to colleges and you noticed what was going on with like one person in your school and their admission to [the state school] and the scholarship they got because they were part Hispanic…

Kelly: Yeah.

Vijay: …um, was there any conversation in your family or amongst your friends about Affirmative Action?
Kelly: Um, we talked about it in class a lot, but yeah, that came up, cause a lot of people at our school ended up going to [the state school] and they didn’t get scholarships at all, even though they definitely had the academics to get scholarships and they were pretty upset about like the whole Affirmative Action thing too.

Vijay: What do you remember, um, feeling or thinking about Affirmative Action yourself?

Kelly: I mean when I was a junior and not really, or like sophomore year, junior year beginning, I didn’t really… I thought it was a good things at points because I’m like it’s good to have a representation of all races in a place so people can kind of get a feel of all different kinds of cultures. But if a family has enough finances to kind of pay their way through, even if they are under-represented, then I feel like they shouldn’t be categorized under the Affirmative Action group really.

In both Ramjam and Kelly’s narratives, they clearly articulate a financial barrier in their own pathway to college and then argue that this barrier was lifted by a university’s preferential option for certain racial groups, Native American and Hispanics, respectively. This “unfairness” seems to position both of the participants against affirmative action and also position them as seemingly undesirable in the calculus of college admissions. Kelly goes as far as to voice the tension she feels between her support of “diversity” and her discomfort with race-based admissions at the end of the excerpt above.

The politics of affirmative action on college campuses often position Asian Americans as honorary Whites, either by overtly including them with Whites as groups not in need of special admissions policies or covertly by simply omitting them from specialty assistance programs.
aimed at “students of color: Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans.” Asian Americans are also used, discursively, to undermine the politics of affirmative action. Wu (1995) writes:

> There are many fallacies in the affirmative action debate. One of them, increasingly prominent, is that Asian Americans somehow are the example that defeats affirmative action. To the contrary, the Asian-American experience should demonstrate the continuing importance of race and the necessity of remedial programs based on race…
> Again and again, claims are made that Asian Americans, like whites, suffer because of affirmative action for African Americans. By the rhetoric, it would almost seem as if Asian Americans, more than whites, have become the "innocent victims" of so-called "reverse discrimination”… The linkage of Asian Americans and affirmative action, however, is an intentional maneuver by conservative politicians to provide a response to charges of racism. (pg. 225)

My findings seem to indicate that Asian American students themselves can be co-opted into this broader political maneuvering, particularly if they do not have the racial knowledge to understand how their positioning in this set of policies and debates furthers White hegemony. Both Ramjam and Kelly’s conclusions appear to demonstrate a stronger understanding of the problematics of class than the inner-workings of race in contemporary American society. Each of them shared stories that seemed to have been plucked from neoconservative discourses about underprepared “minority” students being admitted to college at the expense of White and Asian American students. At the same time, the participants seemed clearly aware that they are not White, per say, and some of their frustration seems to be linked to being not-White but also not included in the politics of race when it comes to affirmative action policies in college admissions.
In their article on Pilipino students in higher education, Buenavista et al. (2009) name this unique subject position “liminal students of color” (p. 76). Buenavista et al. (2009) write, “Pilipino students were no longer considered racial minorities in terms of institutional practices pertaining to access and retention, but at the same time they experienced similar barriers as students of color” (p. 76). This liminality appears to be shaping the participants’ narratives, particularly when discussing affirmative action and college admissions.

The link between racial identity salience and the support for affirmative action policy has received some attention in the scholarship on Asian American college students, but more investigation is needed. In her article, “Diversity’s Missing Minority: Asian Pacific American Undergraduates’ Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action”, Inkelas (2003) writes, “APA [Asian Pacific American] students who indicated that they thought often about their racial/ethnic identity were significantly more likely to support affirmative action practices than students who had not reflected upon their Asian Pacific American identity” (p. 626). Inkelas’s research points to an important bridge between one’s own racial self-concept and one’s relationship to the broader politics of race. The students in my study had very low levels of racial salience as Asian Americans and their deeper investment in ethno-cultural identity did not seem to offer the same outcome as race consciousness might have. When taken in concert with Buenavista et al.’s (2009) characterization of being liminal students of color, Inkelas’s (2003) conclusions offer strong insight into why the participants might not support affirmative action policies, as they relate to college admissions.

While it is possible to understand the participants’ sentiments on affirmative action, their narratives do raise questions about honorary Whiteness serving as a barrier to racial identification. Junn and Masuoka’s (2008) article on the relationship between Asian American
racial identification and political behavior compares Asian American and Black racial salience levels gathered from survey data. They conclude that Asian Americans have a much higher level of variance in their identification with their racial group when compared to African Americans and that this leads to much lower cohesion in their political behavior as a racial group. Junn and Masuoka (2008) write:

The structural factors of racial categorization, immigration policy and racialized tropes help to construct Asian American group identity based on a shared racial status. Rather than the clearly politicized racial identity of blacks, the contours of Asian American group consciousness take shape as latent solidarity. Like blacks, racial categorization for Asian Americans persists, and is readily identifiable on face value. In this sense, racial group membership is not a choice, and categorization as a race other than “white” will always be there and will always play a role. Yet, this racial distinction also means that the formation of Asian American racial group consciousness depends on the particular context. (p. 736)

The crucial role of context in the formation of Asian American race consciousness is a key factor for both scholars and practitioners to take into account. In the current context of race and politics in American society, Asian American college students appear to be being denied of their racial reality by the context of model minoritization and their positioning within affirmative action discourses. This triangulization between race consciousness, model minority typology (which positions them as honorary Whites), and political discourses appears in the participants’ narratives and merits further study by scholars. In addition, student affairs practitioners must be alerted to this phenomenon if they want to effectively engage Asian American students in co-curricular programs focused on politics and race.
A final manifestation of an Asian American racial trope that appeared to have contributed to what the participants learned about race was the Forever Foreigner dynamic. Scholars Ng et al. (2007) write:

He [Ancheta, 2000] writes, “The racialization of Asian Americans has taken on two primary forms: racialization as non-Americans and racialization as the model minority” (p. 44). This outsider racialization constructs Asian Americans as foreign-born outsiders. In the realm of education, this construction extends to the view of Asian Americans as “forever foreigners” (Tuan, 1998), where the permanency of equal status as citizens cannot be fully realized. (p. 96)

Within the participants’ narratives, the Forever Foreigner trope emerged through a startling occlusion. Their recollections of Asian Americans in their K-12 curricula were dismal, at best. I asked each participant what they remember learning about Asian Americans in high school and, more often than not, they recalled something about Asia (i.e. Muslims inventing algebra), rather than anything specific to Asian Americans. Occasionally, they were able to recall a few facts about Asian Americans, such as the use of Chinese American labor to build the transcontinental railroad or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. However, when I probed further to ask what they learned specifically about these incidents or how they felt upon learning this history, they had little depth to share.

The following exchange from my interview with Lina is a prototypical example of the way in which the Forever Foreigner dynamic appears to have shaped what the participants learned about their own racial identity through their high school curricula.
Vijay: When, uh, when you think back to your course work in high school, umm, history, English, courses like that, what do you remember learning about the history of Asian Americans or the literature of Asian Americans?

Lina: Actually, we didn’t really learn specifically, umm, like in class we didn’t really go ... It’s interesting, we didn’t really go over like Asian Americans really, which I thought was interesting. Umm, although, we did go over like the time when, umm, like the Chinese came and, umm, there wasn’t really much covered about it though.

Vijay: What do you remember about that, the incident when the Chinese came?

Lina: Umm, I think it was like about how, umm, different they looked from all the other people who were here, and it was right around the time of the wars too.

Vijay: The ... which wars?

Lina: Umm, I’m not like really a history buff.

[Laughter]

Lina: I’m sorry.

Vijay: Sure, sure.

Lina: But, umm, I think it was like the World War, World War II maybe.

Vijay: Umm, so overall you’re saying you kind of didn’t really cover much about Asian American history or Asian American literature.
Lina: Yeah, it’s just like a small section I remember, like it was just read over and then pretty much what we got tested on was like the other stuff pretty much.

Vijay: The other stuff?

Lina: Or the, umm, I guess like ... I don’t really know how to word this but, umm, I guess it was just the general stuff like how life was. They didn’t really go over, umm ... like they didn’t really specify, but it seemed they didn’t really include the Asian Americans really in it.

Vijay: Who did they include?

Lina: It was ... It seemed like they were … To me it just seemed like they were talking about the white Americans pretty much and then the, umm, like when the African Americans were able to, umm, draft in the war; but other than that, I don’t really remember the Asian American part.

Lina’s narrative evinces both a lack of depth and a lack of accuracy when it comes to learning about the Asian American experience in high school. When taken in concert with the scholarship on Asian American racial identity, this knowledge deficit has implications beyond simply what the participants learned about race growing up.

Kim (2012), in her work on the Asian American Racial Identity Development model, writes, “…racial identity describes how people deal with the effects of racism, eventually disowning the dominant group’s views of their own race and developing a positive self-definition and positive attitude towards their own group” (p. 139). This transformation, from holding the dominant view to developing a more empowering self-concept, is mapped out in five
separate stages in Kim’s model. In describing the shift from stage two, White Identification, to stage three, Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, Kim (2012) argues, “In moving their paradigm from personal to social responsibility, Asian Americans at this stage acquire social and political understanding that enables them to transform their self image” (p. 147). My research findings seem to indicate that this social and political understanding was not available to the participants during their K-12 experience. In the absence of any accurate information about Asian Americans in their high school curricula, I cannot help but wonder how the participants can make progress towards developing a healthy racial identity.

Kawai (2005) carries this analysis of the Forever Foreigner dynamic further by arguing that Asian Americans are used by the nation state as a wedge tool through triangulating them between Whites and Blacks. Kawai (2005) states:

Asian Americans have been historically and racially triangulated as ‘‘aliens’’ or ‘‘outsiders’’ with regard to White Americans but as ‘‘superior’’ in relation to African Americans. The former can be considered to be corresponding to the yellow peril stereotype that describes Asian Americans as ‘‘foreigner foreigners’’ who divert from U.S. dominant cultural norms, are economic competitors, and thereby undermine the White nation. The latter can be considered to be tied to the model minority stereotype that celebrates Asian Americans as the model minority group who, unlike other racial minority groups, move ahead only with their own effort in U.S. society. The latter thus supports ‘‘colorblindness,’’ a dominant racial ideology in the post-civil rights era (Kim, 2000). (p. 110)
While Kawai (2005) cogently connects multiple stereotypes, history and power to articulate how Asian Americans have been used to perpetuate racial hegemony, my research calls for inquiry into how this liminal positioning affects Asian Americans’ *own subjectivity*, particularly their race consciousness. In effect, the question arises: What is the cost for Asian Americans in being used as both a wedge, between other people of color, and as a bolster, to prop up color-blind racism?

In the following exchange with Kelly, one of these “costs” becomes apparent. During this segment of our interview, she is discussing the perception of Asian Americans at the flagship state school in her home state. As she proceeded to describe, in her own words, the model minority myth, I decided to probe to see if she had thought about where this stereotype comes from.

**Vijay:** So there, that’s the truth, there are a lot of them at [the state school]. Um, and you were saying that you feel like there’s this rap around Asians that they’re the successful ones?

**Kelly:** Yeah, definitely.

**Vijay:** What’s that all about?

**Kelly:** I mean I guess from like countries back home the schooling is different, they’re more focused on books and doing well in class, so I guess when they come over to America they grab all the great jobs because they have like more experience and are more educated. So that just carries over to the whole stereotype that Asians are smarter and have better jobs, I guess.
Kelly’s reasoning echoes Kawai’s (2005) arguments about the dialectical link between Forever Foreigner status and model minority typology. When asked about why Asian Americans at the state school are perceived as successful, Kelly locates the agency for this claim in Asian Americans themselves and repeats the dominant logic that Asian Americans are really more *Asian* in their approach to school and that this must be what fuels the stereotype. It seems that the absence of racial knowledge about the Asian American past and present, when combined with other hegemonic dynamics, seems to produce a complicity in Asian American subjects, as they internalize the dominant logic and make it their own. In response to my research question about what they are learning about race, the participants seem to be learning (and not learning) about race in ways that support the dominant, neoliberal framework for managing racial power in contemporary American society.

In conclusion, the participants appeared to have learned to value diversity and cultural pluralism, often in ways that perpetuate a neoliberal politic of sameness that stands as a challenge to movements for social justice. They also seemed to learn more about otherness than racial identity from their personal experiences with racism. This finding is important because the current scholarship on Asian American racial identity development seems to suggest that encountering anti-Asian racism is catalytic in individuals developing an Asian American racial identity. This did not appear to occur for the participants. Finally, these students learned from, and were shaped by, Asian American racial tropes in ways that seem to co-opt their thinking and self-concept into supporting color-blind racial hegemony.
What, if any, Tenets of Color-Blind Racism have they Internalized and/or Contested in their Meaning-Making Process?

My research findings seem to indicate that the participants held a broad commitment to a color-blind racist ideology. Their narratives were heavily laden with the numerous frameworks of color-blind racism described by Bonilla-Silva (2006), Guinier and Torres (2003), and Wise (2010). In the following section of this chapter, I will offer examples that connect my findings to my research questions while also discussing the significance of these findings in light of the nascent scholarship on color-blind racism.

Minimization of racism and the myth of American meritocracy. One of the key frames in color-blind racist ideology is the idea that racism has minimal impact on our society. Bonilla-Silva (2006) writes, “Minimization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances…” (p. 29). This frame appeared throughout the participants’ narratives, both as the thought that racism was not a significant factor in American society and also as the conviction that racism would not have a limiting impact on their own life ambitions.

The following examples from Kelly and Sarah are prototypical of the way in which this frame appeared throughout the participants’ narratives.

1. **Vijay**: Does…. Do you think that racism impacts people’s ability to get that first job anymore in American societies today?

   **Kelly**: I mean, I’ve heard that like companies trying making sure that there’s people of other races and everyone there, but I don’t, I wouldn’t like know a whole lot about that. I
just feel like if people um, like management and hiring people, they take whoever they think is best for the job. They don’t take race or anything into consideration.

2. **Vijay**: Umm, do you think these days in our present, is it… does everyone have an equal opportunity to succeed in America?

**Sarah**: Yeah, I think so.

**Vijay**: Any more you want to share about that?

**Sarah**: I mean I don’t, I really don’t think it’s a problem in education. Like you said, like people actually look for minorities, you know, and like I just … Like I know so many like second-generation kids whose parents have come here and they say like, “Yeah, I only came here on $20 and I managed to like raise kids and get a house and get a job and really work through it…” and stuff, and I definitely feel like everyone has an equal opportunity to like get… I don’t know… You know, like my parents, like they barely spoke English. My dad’s an engineer now, and he had to redo all of his like studying in America. He didn’t have that much money on him, but like they still found ways, you know, like loans and stuff and they worked really hard; so I really don’t think that race or anything like that should get in the way of someone going through school or succeeding.

Kelly and Sarah seem to hold a clear vision of American society as being meritocratic. If people are willing to work hard, then there are no structural barriers to their progress. In contrast to them, one participant, Don, actually used the term “oppression” to describe directional racism from Whites to non-Whites. At the same time, Don also articulated a strong commitment to the meritocratic idea that, in America, personal perseverance is the key to success. Don was the only
participant to use the language of oppression, so I decided to probe further and ask Don to connect his concurrent commitments to individual perseverance and his idea of oppression.

**Vijay:** So, how do those two things fit together? If perseverance can get you anything but there’s major oppression in our society, what does that mean for you?

**Don:** You could persevere through oppression.

**Vijay:** You can persevere through oppression.

**Don:** I feel if you put your mind to it, and if your mind and ambition is together, then perseverance will help you get through anything that you have to go through.

Most of the participants were closely aligned with Sarah’s vision of American society as truly egalitarian. Don, as a potential outlier, still appears to support the mythology of American meritocracy, particularly in the way he centralizes “ambition” as the key to overcoming oppression.

Critical scholarship on color-blind racism (Castro Atwater, 2008; Marshall, 2009) links the broad support of the myth of meritocracy with the maintenance of White hegemony. In his 2003 article, “Color-blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America”, Gallagher argues:

How then, is colorblindness linked to privilege? Starting with the deeply held belief that America is now a meritocracy, Whites are able to imagine that the socioeconomic success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education. The color-blind perspective removes from personal thought and public discussion any taint or suggestion of White supremacy
or White guilt while legitimating the existing social, political, and economic arrangements which privilege Whites. (p. 5)

Gallagher (2003) positions the myth of American meritocracy as a foundation on which color-blind racism advances White hegemony. This framework is significant for my research because it links the participants’ individual viewpoints to broader discursive and power-laced agendas that work to further marginalize non-White group members. What is interesting to note is the participants’ identities as Asian American. The majority of the scholarship on color-blind racism examines its prevalence in White discourses and White individual narratives. My research indicates that more scholarship is needed on the role of non-dominant group members in advancing this hegemonic framework.

I also discovered a secondary manifestation of the minimization of racism frame in some of the participants’ narratives. When confronted directly with anti-Asian racism, the participants frequently “laughed it off” by re-framing these racist incidents as simple ignorance. In the following two examples, Lina and Ramjam experience anti-Asian racism and seem to make use of a “minimization” strategy as a response.

1. **Lina**: And, umm, and then one day I asked her [Lina’s teacher] a question in class like during work time, and then she told me, “Wow, your English is really good,” and I’m like, “Oh, umm, I was born here.” And so it was kind of funny how it kind of made me laugh and it kind of annoyed me at the same time.

2. **Vijay**: ... umm, why do you think they said that to you? (In reference to Ramjam sharing a story where he was called a terrorist on the basketball court)
Ramjam: Umm, I feel it was out of their own frustration possibly because one wouldn’t really joke about that and be like, “Oh, ha, you’re a terrorist,” like I mean it wouldn’t be like that situation. It was either out of frustration or the fact that he wanted to crack a joke in front of his friends, but it was out of the frustration at the moment, so yeah.

While Bonilla-Silva (2006) does not seem to intend for his minimization of racism framework to encapsulate these types of coping strategies, I think that the prevalence of this phenomenon throughout the participants’ narratives merits further attention.

Lewis’s 2001 study of color-blind ideology in a predominantly White school setting has much to offer my own analysis of minimization. Lewis (2001) makes use of Critical Race Theory to frame color-blindness as the “common sense” of our current hegemonic system. Lewis (2001) writes:

Rather than a benign phenomenon, in many ways it [color-blind racial common sense] helps to enable the reproduction of racial inequality. Color-blindness enables all members of the community to avoid confronting the racial realities that surround them, to avoid facing their own racist presumptions and understandings, and to avoid dealing with racist events (by deracializing them). (p. 801)

Lewis (2001) proceeds to describe the numerous ways in which color-blind racism shapes the environment of the school she is studying, from the teachers to the students.

Of particular relevance to my analysis is Lewis’s (2001) finding that the teachers at this school seem aware of racist incidents between the children and that they reframe them as “kid put-downs” (p. 790). Lewis (2001) argues that this color-blind repackaging of racist language as “put-downs” has serious implications:
Here the specificity of racist put-downs are glossed over as not really being racial-as just the regular things kids say to one another. As Essed (1997) has discussed, this strategy of deracializing incidents where racist slurs are used implies that they are like regular, everyday conflicts in which both parties should be held equally responsible; such a mode of addressing racist events makes it seem as if the victim is the one with the problem rather than the perpetrator (e.g., Sylvie being talked about as "playing the race card"), as if they are making a big deal out of nothing. This functions as tolerance for racist slurring-implying the comments are like other put-downs that just happen to be racial. (p. 790)

The participants appear to be using the same deracinating schema to justify laughing-off racist incidents, even when they are the victims. While one could simply describe this as a coping mechanism for enduring daily racial microaggressions, this phenomenon could also be understood as a new manifestation of the minimization frame, within communities of color. Perhaps, in order to maintain a broader color-blind worldview, the participants felt the need to minimize incidents of racism, by re-branding them as ignorance. Lewis’s (2001) work provokes the question: In a world where race has no bearing, how can one explain racism through a color-blind lens? In her analysis of the predominantly White school, it appears that the minimization frame serves to bridge this psychological schism for teachers that adhere to a color-blind worldview while also witnessing racist incidents between the schoolchildren. Further research and study is necessary to understand this same schism within communities of color and Asian Americans in particular.

**Cultural racism—the hegemony of individuality.** Another manifestation of color-blind racism in the participants’ narratives appeared through the framework of cultural racism.
Cultural racism explains the differential standing of people of color and Whites in American society by pointing to the “culture” of different groups as an explanation for why some groups fare better than others. Bonilla-Silva (2006) explains, “This cultural racism frame is very well established in the United States. Originally labeled as the “culture of poverty” in the 1960s, this tradition has resurfaced many times since…” (p. 40). He proceeds to describe a phenomenon whereby the “cultural racism” frame, when combined with the “minimization of racism” frame allows White people to discredit people of color’s claims of discrimination and simultaneously point the finger of blame back on non-White culture.

Over the course of my interviews, the cultural racism frame appeared a few times in ways that compel deeper analysis. Two examples, from my interviews with Don and Victoria, are strong representations of how this frame appeared in the participants’ narratives. In the following excerpt, Don and I were discussing the prevalence of racism in American society and I decided to ask him directly about anti-Asian American racism. I made the choice to use the term Asian, instead of Asian American, because Don was using the term Asian to mean Asian American. When I tried to use the term Asian American, it appeared to confuse him and disrupt the interview process.

Vijay: Are Asian people affected by racism?

Don: Not as much as others, I don’t believe not as much as others.

Vijay: How come?

Don: Umm, I guess you don’t hear much about like Asian people going, committing as much crime as other minorities, and I guess that plays an effect on the majority who are like, oh, these people are actually trying to do, trying to make, come up in this world, so
they are a little lenient on us, a little lenient because they see we’re trying to be hard working.

**Vijay:** So, just so I can understand, umm, your answer, so Asian people don’t face as much racism because in our society they’re perceived to be harder working?

**Don:** Yeah.

**Vijay:** Okay. So in the opposite of that, is the reason that let’s say African-American people face more racism, is that because they are perceived to be less hard working?

**Don:** I mean no, it’s not like that. I wouldn’t put it that way. I mean everyone works as hard as their ability. But when you look at the news and you hear about shootings, they usually come out of majority African-American neighborhoods. Like we had about 500, about 500-something shootings this year, and majority of them came from the, you know, the Englewood neighborhood and around like the African-American neighborhoods. So, with that, hearing that people are just like they have a negative idea about how African Americans are.

Like Bonilla-Silva (2006) suggests, Don’s narrative represents a potent blending of the cultural racism logic with a minimization frame. Don locates the blame for anti-Black racism within the African American community while also implying that Asian Americans are getting ahead simply because they work hard. One can also see the minimization logic at work in nuanced ways as Don concludes that the prevalence of violent crimes in certain predominantly Black neighborhoods of Chicago leads individual White people to hold mistaken conceptions of racism. This characterization of racism as interpersonal, rather than structured and systemic,
supports Guinier and Torres’s (2003) assertion that color-blind racism positions any extant modern racism as simply person-to-person racial intolerance.

In the following lengthier example, Victoria is sharing her critique of students of color at her high school. She begins by speaking about people who only hang out with other people of their own race, which she finds deeply problematic. It is important to note that Victoria shared that she only hangs out with White people, but sees this as a race-neutral choice. Her narrative covers a lot of ground and, eventually, ends up in the terrain of cultural racism. Throughout the first part of her discourse, Victoria is using terms like “you” and “they” abstractly to describe people broadly in her high school.

**Victoria:** Like you’ve always, you’ve always done it [socialize with people of your own race] and a lot of ... maybe not even a lot of people but just people in general aren’t comfortable with putting themselves out there to make friends with lots of people and they keep more to themselves. And maybe that’s, maybe that’s just how they are, but I don’t think that necessarily calling the race card just because you don’t ... I don’t hang out with these people [other Filipinos] or I don’t ... that group of people I don’t really care for, or I only hang out with whites; I only hang out with blacks, Hispanics, whatever it may be. Like is that ... That’s your routine and you’re comfortable with it; I can respect that, but then you have no right to judge I guess and slur and call for equality if you’re not working for it yourself.

Like if ... Like when you vote, you have a right to complain about whatever official is elected if that’s the one that you didn’t vote for, if that’s the one you didn’t want in
office; but if you didn’t vote, then you have no right to say anything because you didn’t use your voice and you didn’t, you didn’t contribute.

Vijay: Yeah.

Victoria: If you’re going to call the race card all the time, then why act like the stereotype and complain about the stereotype? Why not try to break the stereotype if you just have such a problem with whatever stereotype you happen to be? Like I wasn’t really friends with her in high school, but she was Hispanic and she was very, very stereotypical and she had very strong views on stereotypes, like I’m going to be different, but it turned out she was a stereotype.

Vijay: What do you mean by that? Share more. Like what do you mean when you say she was stereotypical? How did she act?

Victoria: She was, umm, I guess she acted ghetto a lot, but I guess that’s ... She grew up south in Detroit, so I understand you act like where you come from; but she was complaining about the stereotype of the Hispanics having this boyfriend for years and years and then getting pregnant in high school. Oh, what do you know, you’re pregnant in high school and you’re not married, and you’re expecting another one this year, and she graduated a year ahead of me. And I don’t think that if ... Okay, yeah, sure, the first one is an accident; but clearly the second time around you would think you were smarter. And I don’t think she has a right to complain. She’s always speaking Spanish - and like I don’t mind because I like listening - but she’s speaking Spanish and then she gets ghetto; but then she only, umm, she complains about the boys she talks to, but they’re the ones she chooses to talk to. That was her choice. She doesn’t have to talk to the boys that are
in the gang or whatever. And she made that choice to have the baby. Well, I have nothing against having the baby, but you were the stereotype that everyone talked about in high school, like that girl that just ends up pregnant for prom. Woo, you were pregnant. Well, it turns out she was pregnant at prom but it wasn’t from prom but like the stereotype, but still that’s pretty, it’s pretty close. And if you’re going to complain about a stereotype, why keep with it? If you think it’s so bad, then why wouldn’t you work to change it or be the opposite? Or I don’t know, there’s a difference. Make a change, make a difference in people’s thought processes, make ...

In her critique of this classmate, Victoria seems to employ a cultural racism frame by shifting the analysis away from racism and back onto her Hispanic classmate, who Victoria feels is an embodiment of “the stereotype.” Victoria concludes that, “If you’re going to complain about a stereotype, why keep with it?” which rings of cultural racism, as Victoria clusters her classmate’s high school pregnancy and use of the Spanish language in the same critique. Elements of Victoria’s thinking seem to use a “culture of poverty” framework to problematize the Hispanic community rather than structural racism that negatively impacts the Hispanic community.

The presence of cultural racism, such as Don’s and Victoria’s narratives, in the participants’ stories speaks to the complex, interlocking relationship within many of the frames of color-blind racism. These interview excerpts demonstrate how minimization serves to obscure the structural reality of White hegemonic racism and, paving the way for cultural racism, thus shifts the etiology of racial inequity onto communities of color. Cultural racism is further strengthened by the characterization of modern racism as being not simply minimal, but strictly limited to the individual.
This interlocking tension, between the minimization frame, the cultural racism frame, and the racism-as-interpersonal frame, is further explored by Reason and Evans (2007). They articulate a deep connection between Whiteness and color-blind racial ideology in the following passage. Reason and Evans (2007) write:

First, the color-blind reality is deeply rooted in the belief that “good” White people can and comfortably do ignore race. This view is also grounded in the hegemony of individuality—any existing inequalities are a result of personal problems rather than racism—a worldview that maintains a particularly pernicious form of racism. (p. 73)

The hegemony of individuality linked to Whiteness offers strong explanation for the salience of color-blind logic with White people. Not only is racism reductively framed as an idea held by individuals, rather than being systemic (Guinier & Torres, 2003), but Reason and Evans (2007) argue that the hegemony of individuality works to undergird cultural racism by decentering racism in people’s analysis of inequity. While Reason and Evans (2007) make a compelling case for the role of individualism, as a cornerstone of Whiteness, in driving color-blind racism, my findings on the salience of multiple color-blind frames within the participants’ narratives complicate the analysis.

My research findings raise troubling questions about the hegemony of individuality within Asian Americans, a group often known for their collectivist cultural orientation (Kodama et al., 2002). Can Asian Americans subscribe to a hegemony of individualism that is intimately tied to Whiteness? One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the dominance of the ethnicity paradigm in the participants’ sense of identity. Omi and Winant (1994) remind us of the central role of individualism in the ethnicity paradigm, as it was deployed by
neoconservatives post-1965 as a political counter-measure to racial demands for group rights. Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the ethnicity paradigm has had three major phases, including, “...a post-1965 phase, in which the paradigm has taken on the defense of conservative (or "neoconservative") egalitarianism against what is perceived as the radical assault of ‘group rights’” (p.14). Perhaps, strong adherence to the ethnicity paradigm primes Asian Americans for the hegemony of individuality elements of color-blind racism. Further research will be required to explore this seeming contradiction, between individualism and collectivism, in Asian American subjects if we are to understand the nuances of color-blind racism within non-White communities.

A final possible explanation for the salience of certain aspects of Whiteness in the narratives of my Asian American participants can be found in the provocative scholarship on the new racial color line by Lee and Bean (2007). Lee and Bean (2007) argue that, until the latter part of the 20th century, the American racial color line was organized along a set of White/non-White axes. A history of systemic racism clearly demarcated people as either inside the White racial group or outside of it, and accorded them rights and privileges based on this positioning. Lee and Bean (2007) write that, “While blacks were clearly nonwhite under the legislation, Asians and Latinos were also consigned to the nonwhite side of the strict binary divide” (p. 564). They proceed to argue that this strict divide can be found even through to the 1980s, when the term “people of color” gained popularity. Lee and Bean (2007) explain that:

By homogenizing the experiences of all nonwhite groups, the “people of color” rubric indicates that the boundaries among nonwhite groups are less distinct and salient than the boundary separating whites and nonwhites. Accordingly, in a white-nonwhite model of
racial/ethnic relations, Asians and Latinos would fall closer to blacks than to whites in
their experiences in the United States. (p. 566)

This White/non-white racial paradigm is reflective of my own thinking on race and power in
American society and, furthermore, this racial cartography informed the construction of my
dissertation research. Lee and Bean (2007) propose, however, that the White/non-White color
line might have been reorganized in the last two decades.

Lee and Bean (2007) conclude that, as a result of recent social science research, our
understanding of the color-line might need to be nuanced. They argue that the White/non-White
framework does not account for the role of economic upward mobility and the complex
relationship between class and race in American society. By analyzing the history of European
immigrant groups that were clearly marked as non-White upon arriving in America, Lee and
Bean (2007) demonstrate how economic success shifted these European non-Whites into the
White group. Lee and Bean (2007) also argue that the same shift has occurred for Asian
Americans:

Today, so extreme is the shift in America’s racial hierarchy that Asians, now donning
titles of “model minority” and “honorary whites,” have become the group against which
other nonwhite groups are often judged and compared – a far cry from the derisive
designation “yellow horde” that once described Asian immigrants... (p. 567)

Lee and Bean (2007) note that the exception to this pattern is the racial categorization of Black
people. They argue that economic mobility has not diluted the Black racial category, nor has it
shifted Blacks into the White category. In sum, Lee and Bean (2007) offer that America might
have a new color line, organized around Black/non-Black axes. In this schema, all non-Black
groups share more in common with each other than they do with Blacks and society reorganizes its racial logic around a closeness to, or distance from, the Blackness model. In this model, Asian Americans would fall squarely in the non-Black group. Lee and Bean (2007) also note that some social scientists have proposed a “tri-racial divide” to explain America’s current color-line. This model has a White group, an Honorary White group, and a collective Black group. In this model, the vast majority of Asian Americans would fall in the honorary White group, with Filipinos, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Laotians being classified as collective Blacks.

While significant new research will have to be conducted to further explore these classification schemas, Lee and Bean (2007) raise an important question to consider for my study. Does the salience of aspects of Whiteness in the participants’ narratives reflect a possible tectonic shift in the subject position of Asian Americans on the American color-line? If these new color-lines are accurate, perhaps a hegemony of individuality theme appears in the participants’ thinking because they have been racially positioned as closer to White than ever before in U.S. history. Lee and Bean (2007) caution, “Because boundaries are loosening for some nonwhite groups, this could lead to the erroneous conclusion that race is declining in significance for all groups…” (p. 580). This analysis provides a link between their theory of a shifting color-line and my own research on color-blind racism, particularly the minimization of racism frame. Further research and examination of Lee and Bean’s (2007) ideas will be necessary if we hope to understand the complex relationship between color-blind racism and the modern American color-line.

**Racism is just person-to-person—a distortion of reality effect.** Of the many frames of color-blind racism to appear in the participants’ narratives, the notion that racism is about specific individuals, rather than being systemic and structural, appeared with great frequency and
clarity. All nine of the participants spoke of racism as a phenomenon limited to individuals and often confused ideas like stereotypes with racism in their reflections. Guinier and Torres (2003) describe this thinking as one of the three major aspects of color-blind racism. Guinier and Torres (2003) write:

The third rule is that racism is a personal problem. Unlike capitalism or socialism which are economic systems, or democracy, which is a political arrangement, racism, racial hierarchy, or any institutionalized racial discrimination is not an economic or historic system, political arrangement, or social structure. Under the third rule of colorblindness, racism lacks any necessary nexus to power or privilege, and any observed connection is incidental, merely the result of the actions of people with a bad heart. Racism is a psychological disease of individuals, not a social plague. (p. 39)

The authors cogently link the seemingly innocent characterization of racism-as-personal to a complex, powerful framework for obscuring racial hegemony. The participants appeared to have thoroughly internalized this understanding of racism.

In the following two short excerpts, Kelly and Sarah each use the logic and language of Guinier and Torres’s (2003) third rule of colorblindness in how they characterize the role of racism in American society.

1. Vijay: Um, do you think that um, that racism is still a factor in American life today?

Kelly: Stereotypes are definitely still present. I mean everyone knows the common stereotypes that, I don’t know, Taco Bell, Hispanics; Dunkin’ Donuts, Indians; like everyone has those stereotypes. And I, I personally have never experienced any like real racism where everyone is really trying to like be rude or mean to someone, but I guess
like, I bet in some parts of the country it still exists, I just have never experienced it or seen it.

2. **Vijay**: So yeah, thank you. Umm, when you look forward to your next couple of years of college, umm, do you think that your racial identity will impact your future college years at all?

**Sarah**: Umm, I hope not. I want to be…I want to be a psychologist, so I hope people don’t mind that I’m Indian. I hope it doesn’t affect my job or career at all, but I don’t expect it to be a problem.

Kelly’s reflection is rich with color-blind meaning-making. She appears to not understand the connection between stereotypes and racism when she argues that racial stereotypes are still quite prevalent but that racism itself doesn’t seem to hold a large role in her life. She also characterizes “real racism” specifically as people being rude or mean, echoing Guinier and Torres’s (2003) suggestion that the third rule of colorblindness posits racism as people with bad hearts. Similarly, Sarah seems to narrowly frame racism as people minding that she is Indian before concluding that she doesn’t think her racial identity will impact her future. Sarah’s narrative demonstrates the dialectical nature of color-blind frames, as her misunderstanding of racism, vis-à-vis Guinier and Torres’s (2003) rule number three, appears to produce and/or reinforce a minimization of racism effect, as demonstrated in her conclusion that she doesn’t think her racial identity will be a problem in her future life. The same dialectic might also be present in Kelly’s internalization of rule number three and her minimization of racism to a local, antiquated phenomenon that might “still exist” in “some parts of the country”.
These findings support and complicate the nascent scholarship on color-blind racism, in particular the research on color-blind racism’s ability to distort one’s perception of reality. In a quantitative study of White college students, color-blind racial attitudes, and perceptions of campus climate, Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, and Hart (2008) found that students with higher levels of color-blind racial attitudes were more likely to report a positive racial and ethnic campus climate. Worthington et al. (2008) write:

It is also apparent that those who express an unawareness of racial privilege (i.e., color blindness) may be more likely to perceive the racial-ethnic campus climate more positively. This is to suggest that stereotypes and racialized campus climate must be viewed through multiple lenses, not only through the lenses of those who experience racial privilege (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Our findings suggest that a color blind approach is likely to result in perceptions of climate that are potentially more positive than is warranted, and is likely to be at odds with the perceptions of students of color. (p. 17)

Worthington et al.’s (2008) findings support what is sometimes referred to (Gushue, 2004) as a *distortion* effect of color-blind racism, whereby individuals’ perception of reality is impaired by their adherence to color-blind racial attitudes. This “distortion of reality” phenomenon could be useful in understanding what is happening in the participants’ meaning-making processes. Perhaps, their adherence to the color-blind thinking that racism is purely person-to-person creates a distortion effect that allows them to also see racism as a minimal presence in modern life.
Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, and Ambady’s (2010) study of the effects of color-blind curricula on primary school children offers support for the distortion of reality theory. The authors of this study exposed children to two curricula, including one set that actively minimized racial distinction and consideration and another that held a “value-diversity” perspective. They then exposed the children to controlled scenarios where racial discrimination of varying extremity levels occurred and tested whether the children were able to perceive the discrimination in each scenario. The children who were primed with the color-blind curricula were significantly less able to perceive discrimination in the scenarios that the children primed with the value-diversity curricula. Apfelbaum et al. (2010) conclude:

…our findings raise distressing practical implications, including the possibility that well intentioned efforts to promote egalitarianism via color blindness sometimes promote precisely the opposite outcome, permitting even explicit forms of racial discrimination to go undetected and unaddressed. In doing so, color blindness may create the false impression of an encouraging decline in racial bias, a conclusion likely to reinforce its further practice and support. Despite this perception of tangible progress toward equality, however, color blindness may not reduce inequity as much as it adjusts the lens through which inequity is perceived and publicly evaluated. (p. 5)

Apfelbaum et al.’s (2010) conclusions, along with Worthington et al.’s (2008), raise important questions for future studies of meaning-making processes related to race and racism. If color-blind racism produces a distortion of reality by leveraging numerous frames that shape the way in which individuals interpret data and draw conclusions, then narratological approaches that centralize the story-itself as data (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) must begin to wrestle with the relationship between individual perception and hegemonic systems of dominance. Color-blind
Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues for a conceptualization of color-blind racism as an ideology that is part of a system of dominance. As a result of this framing, Bonilla-Silva (2006) writes:

…an ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system the same way and to the same degree. Instead, an ideology is dominant if most members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system have to accommodate their views vis-à-vis that ideology. If an ideology dominates the space of what people think is feasible and thinkable, and even provides the parameters to oppose the status quo, then that ideology is dominant. (p. 152)

Bonilla-Silva (2006) offers another lens through which to understand the distortion of reality effect. By casting color-blind racism as an ideology, he locates individual subjects’ meaning-making processes within this broader ideological field of power, thereby providing an explanation as to how the various frames of color-blind racism might work to create the “false impression” described by Apfelbaum et al. (2010) and reiterated by the study participants.

Ideology, in the Gramscian sense, might help us understand how individual subjects’ narratives can be co-opted, and can contest, the dominant racial order. This explanation is also particularly relevant to my study, as such a large portion of the extant scholarship on color-blind racism is currently focused on White agents and subjects and Bonilla-Silva (2006) attends to the both dominant and subordinated group members in his explanation of dominance and ideology.

In conclusion, the research participants internalized many of the tenets of color-blind racism in their meaning-making processes without significant contestation. This broad
adherence to the ideology of color-blind racism appeared to produce complicity with the neoliberal myth of American meritocracy. In subtle, complex ways, a hegemony of individuality appeared in some of the participants’ narratives that raises questions for further scholarly investigation. And, finally, the participants appeared to experience a distortion effect in how they perceived racism in our society. In aggregate, my findings in relation to this research sub-question challenge the scholarship on color-blind racism to examine the mechanics and impact of this racial ideology in Asian American subjects, departing from the current norm of analyzing the mechanics and impact of this hegemonic system in White subjects.
CHAPTER 8 – IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Key Implication for Praxis

As a student affairs scholar-practitioner, I intend for this research study to contribute to the broader scholarship on college students, Asian Americans, and color-blind racism. I also hope to impact the way in which student affairs educators engage Asian American college students, design programs for them, and assess their co-curricular learning. The final section of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring the ways in which my research opens new avenues for student affairs praxis.

Problematicizing student development theory. Student affairs educators draw from numerous bodies of theory and research to inform their co-curricular work with students. Student development theory is one of the central bodies of scholarship that student affairs practitioners use to intentionally design programs that help college students experience positive transformation during their undergraduate years (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1975; Torres et al., 2009). One subset of student development theory focuses specifically on the racial identity development of college students. It is my contention that this literature does not, in any meaningful way, address the hegemonic impact of color-blind racist ideology on the racial identity development of college students today. This critical omission bears several important implications for student affairs practice.

More than ten years ago, in an issue of the Journal of Higher Education, Tanaka (2002) asked, “Why have research methods on college student development not kept pace with the proliferation of social theory since the 1970s addressing the connection between culture, power, and knowledge?” (p. 263). Tanaka (2002) attempts, with this challenge, to call attention to the
disconnect between critical theory and student development theory. The minimal presence of critical theory in the research and scholarship of student development has serious implications, particularly when considering the literature that specifically attempts to chart the racial identity development of college students.

Patton et al. (2007) extend Tanaka’s (2002) analysis into the racial identity development literature. Patton et al. (2007) argue that while the impact of student development theory on student affairs practice is undoubtedly significant, this body of theory is lacking in its conceptualization of the roles of race and racism in shaping college student identity development. In their research, Patton et al. (2007) demonstrate how three classic and often-cited student development theories fail to acknowledge the roles of race and racism in shaping young adults’ self-concept and meaning-making processes. Both Tanaka (2002) and Patton et al. (2007) advocate for a critical approach to student development theory, one that accounts for the influence of hegemony, power, systemic oppression, and racism on human development in our society. Patton et al. (2007) explicitly note the presence of color-blind racism in shaping individual’s racial identity development and suggest a Critical Race Theory approach to formulating new racial identity development models.

The scholarly field of student development theory has yet to heed these authors’ call. As a result, student affairs practitioners who are trained using these theories are offered few tools to incorporate a critical understanding of color-blind racism into their work with college students. My research findings suggest that this lacuna places all college students at risk of being mis-served or under-served in their co-curricular education. More specifically, my research suggests that Asian American students might be particularly compromised in the disjuncture between their lived experience in a system of color-blind racism and their co-curricular education at the hands
of student affairs practitioners that might not be aware of the role of dominant ideology in shaping these students’ experience of race.

**Taking a closer look: Two-stage theories for Asian American racial identity development.** While there is still very little written about Asian American college students in student development theory, the extant work tends to focus on ethnicity and acculturation over racial identity and racism (Buenavista et al., 2009; Kim, 2012). As noted earlier in this chapter, there are two racial identity development theories explicitly for Asian American college students: Alvarez’s (2002) adaptation of Helms’s (1990) model and Kim’s (2012) Asian American Racial Identity Development (AARID) model. Both of these models centralize the role of racism and socio-political events in provoking Asian American students to move from an ethnic-only identity stage towards a form of race consciousness. The Asian American research participants experienced racism, but did not seem to move towards the development of a racial identity as a result of these experiences. Instead, their experiences with racism produced an otherness, rather than a clear identification as Asian American. In aggregate, my research findings suggest that color-blind racist ideology appears to be exerting constant downward pressure on the participants’ sense of self, producing an invisible barrier for racial identification.

Both Kim (2012) and Alvarez (2002) seem aware of color-blindness in their theorization of Asian American racial identity development. Closer analysis of these two theories reveals that color-blindness is acknowledged as a factor in racial identity development, but the extent of the impact of color-blind racism is not fully captured in these Asian American racial identity development models. Alvarez (2002) writes:
The development of the Dissonance status of racial identity begins to evolve as Asian American students continue to encounter experiences that suggest that race may be related to the differential treatment of both themselves and others. As their color-blind racial views are challenged, students maybe begin to question their idealization of white individuals and white culture as well as their denigration of Asian Americans and Asian culture. (p. 37)

Alvarez (2002) appears be framing color-blindness as a developmental stage, rather than a dominant ideology in our society. This conceptualization has larger implications for his conclusions, as he accords enormous potential to individual encounters with racism in moving Asian American students towards a race consciousness. My research findings, particularly on the hegemony of individuality phenomenon, seem to indicate that color-blind racism works as an ideological filter in students’ meaning-making processes, shaping the conclusions they draw from their experience of the world. The participants’ direct encounters with racism seemed to have been processed through several color-blind frames, such as minimization and racism-is-person-to-person, and their resulting conclusions appear to reify their individual ethnic identity rather than engender a broader race consciousness.

Kim’s (2012) AARID theory parallels Alvarez in that encounters with racism are posited as catalytic in moving Asian American students towards the development of an Asian American racial identity. Kim (2012) writes, “This transformation begins with a realistic assessment of Asian Americans’ social position and a clear realization of the existence of societal blocks and the futility of trying to ‘pass’...within the White world” (p. 147). The centrality of color-blind racism in the participants’ meaning-making process challenges Kim’s (2012) assumption that a “clear realization” of structural racism is accessible to today’s Asian American college student.
In particular, my findings on the “distortion of reality” effect of color-blind racism raise serious implications for student affairs practitioners to consider, as major socio-political events, alongside personal encounters with racism, cannot be assumed to be formative in the development of individual Asian Americans’ race consciousness.

Kim (2012) appears to be cognizant that race consciousness might be harder for Asian Americans to access in our current historical moment. In her chapter on the AARID model, Kim (2012) raises the following challenge:

The political climate in the United States has changed significantly since the 1960s and the 1970s. There is more acceptance of the racial status quo, more political backlash about affirmative action, and more resistance to dealing with social oppression and injustice. Given the importance of the sociopolitical environment in facilitating the development of an Asian American facial identity, how will the current, politically less progressive environment affect Asian Americans? Will Asian American identity evolve as outlined in the AARID theory if there are fewer opportunities to become involved in political movements…? (p. 153)

Kim’s thoughtful analysis takes into account the critical role of civil rights history and struggle in the formation of an Asian American racial identity and race consciousness. Her analysis of the post-Civil Rights Era, however, does not seem to explicitly include the ascendance of color-blind racism as the dominant racial ideology of our time. This elision produces critical implications for practice, as student affairs practitioners using the AARID model still will not be able to account for color-blind racism as a mitigating factor in Asian American students’ racial identity development.
Alternatives for praxis: The point of entry model for Asian American identity consciousness and the model for multiple dimensions of identity. I began this research study by asking the question, “How do first-year Asian American students at an urban, private university in the Midwest make meaning of their racial identity in an era of color-blind racism?” The results of my research seem to indicate that color-blind racism has a profound effect on how Asian American students think of their own racial identity and how they make meaning of the role of race and racism in modern life. Student affairs practitioners that work with Asian American college students need a way to account for color-blind racism in their programmatic design and their engagement models, or they run the risk of deeply underserving this community. Recent work by Accapadi (2012) and Abes et al. (2007), when used in tandem, might offer practitioners a theoretical model that both accounts for the unique terrain of Asian American racial identity development as well as the critical role of meaning-making in how students actually form a sense of racial self.

Accapadi’s (2012) Point of Entry Model for Asian American Identity Consciousness (POE Model) is a departure from Alvarez’s (2002) and Kim’s (2012) work in two key ways. First, it was conceptualized for the unique contours of Asian American racial identity from the very start, without assuming either a Black or White subject position as normative in its theorization of racial identity. Accapadi (2012) explains:

To date, the models for understanding Asian American identity force us to examine identity formation through a narrow ethnic/cultural lens, as a Black-White racial binary, or on a continuum that assumes Asian Americans aspire to or negotiate Whiteness and
White racism… We need to move to a conceptual identity model that is dynamic, is informed by interdisciplinary scholarship, acknowledges multiple heterogeneous Asian Americas, and honors the intersection of racial identity with other social identities—we need an “Asian Americanist” approach... (p. 71)

Alvarez’s (2002) attempt to posit a racial identity development model involved recrafting Helms’s (1990) stage theory, which was an adaptation of Cross’s (1971) model, which was originally developed for African American subjects. Kim’s (2012) AARID model, another stage theory, centralizes Whiteness as the reflective other that Asian Americans negotiate their own racial identity against and through.

Secondly, Accapadi’s (2012) POE Model is a factor-based model, rather than a stage-model. This shift is important, according to Accapadi (2012), because:

This model allows for the possibility of multiple points of entry (or exit) on one’s racial identity journey, which is fluid, continuous, and dynamic. Like Horse’s and Wijeyesinghe’s models, this one offers factors that inform one’s racial identity consciousness, with the understanding that the racial identity consciousness is also informing one’s relationship with one’s other identities. This model can be presented in any order; it is nonlinear and nonhierarchical by design. It is grounded in the idea that individuals can begin the journey of racial identity exploration by engaging in their other identities. (p. 72)

The POE Model offers six different factors that serve as possible points of entry into Asian American Identity Consciousness: Ethnic Attachment, Familial Influence, Immigration History, External Influence & Perceptions, Self as Other, and Other Social Identities (gender, sexual
orientation, ability, class, etc). These six factors each represent a doorway in and out of the conceptual space of Asian American racial identity (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Point of Entry Model for Asian American Identity Consciousness. Adapted from “Asian American identity consciousness: A polycultural model,” by M. M. Accapadi, 2012, in A. Agbayani & D. Ching (Eds.), Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education: Research and perspectives on identity, leadership, and success, pp. 57-94. Copyright 2012 by National Association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

The POE Model might offer greater utility to student affairs practitioners looking to effectively engage and educate Asian American college students for several reasons. First, the model does not assume that each student enters university life in a certain developmental stage. Nor does the model propose that there is a linear pathway through which students must move if
they are to reach a place where they can confidently identify as Asian American and comfortably balance this racial identity with their other social identities. Secondly, since the model was developed consciously with Asian Americans in mind, the six factors offer practitioners a nuanced capture of all the different possible pathways in which Asian American consciousness can be engaged and developed. Finally, Accapadi (2012) explicitly names Critical Race Theory as a foundational epistemology for the POE Model, thereby signifying to practitioners an attendant set of critical values that must accompany the usage of the POE Model. Accapadi (2012) argues that Critical Race Theory allows for scholar-practitioners to conceptualize Asian American identity development with Asian Americans positioned as the central subjects on the journey. Her model responds to the call from critical scholars of student development theory to centralize the roles of race and racism in how college student identity development is conceptualized.

Another model, when used in parallel with the POE Model, might open new possibilities for praxis for student affairs educators that work with Asian American college students. Abes et al.’s (2007) reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) offers practitioners a way to center individuals’ meaning-making capacities in the identity development process. Abes et al. (2007) note that the original conceptualization of the MMDI was highly influential, noting, “Much of the recent literature on multiple identities in student affairs scholarship references Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity…” (p. 3). The original model offered practitioners a way to understand the complex interplay between contextual factors and multiple, intersectional social identities in producing one’s sense of self, or identity. However, upon much review, the authors decided that the model did not
account for a critical component of agency that the individual has in the meaning-making and identity formation process.

While the original MMDI gained significant traction in the field as a result of its strong capture of intersectionality in identity development, the model failed to accord much agency to the individual in interpreting contextual influences as a part of identity development. By adding an explicit factor of meaning-making capacity to the reconceptualized MMDI, the Abes et al. (2007) moved towards a more accurate account of how individuals form a sense of identity, as a constant negotiation between various contextual influences, the multiple social identities they carry, and their own ability to make meaning of how all of these factors shape their sense of self.
The reconceptualized MMDI offers student affairs educators that work with Asian American college students a framework through which to understand the potential for transformative change in any identity development work. While individual practitioners might not be able to change contextual influences or the social identities carried by a student, the
MMDI asserts that they can work to increase the capacity and complexity of the students’ meaning-making process. This emphasis on agency is critical when working with Asian American college students on racial identity development. My research demonstrates the enormous hegemonic pressure being exerted on these students through the ideology of color-blind racism, as well as the constant process of meaning-making my students engaged in as a result.

The MMDI exposes a liberatory opportunity in the face of hegemony, as student affairs practitioners can, and do, design programs to engage students in meaning-making experiences that can help them generate counter-narratives to resist color-blind oppression. This work is bolstered by the recent increase in scholarship on co-curricular programs that engender greater and more complex meaning-making capacities in students (Daloz-Parks, 2011; Nash & Murray, 2010). Finally, while the reconceptualized MMDI does not explicitly name color-blind racism in its theorization of identity development, it does explicitly list “sociopolitical conditions (Abes et al., p. 7)” as an example of what might be a contextual influence on one’s identity development. In this regard, the MMDI at least can account for color-blind racism as a factor to be addressed when attempting to engage students’ identity development process.

Neither the POE Model nor the MMDI were designed with color-blind racism in mind. They do not explicitly center color-blind ideology in the way they frame the relationship between individual subjects’ identity development and White hegemonic state power. My research findings, however, suggest that these two models offer practitioners a unique opportunity. My central recommendation for practitioners is to engage in constant, rigorous theoretical engagement with the dynamics of color-blind racial oppression. A complex engagement with color-blind racism, Gramscian hegemony, and neoliberalism must serve as a theoretical
foundation for practitioners, shaping their approach to using identity development models with Asian American college students. I named this section of the chapter Alternatives for Praxis because I believe that the work of contesting color-blind racism can be found in the application of theory to core student affairs practices: program design, student engagement, and outcomes assessment.

The POE Model and the MMDI represent a unique blend of Asian American-specific identity consciousness mapping with a focus on meaning-making capacity. My research illuminates a terrain of racial formation within Asian America that demands a relevant, race-specific, response. The results of my research also speak to the enormous power of hegemony in co-opting the meaning-making process of even subordinated group members, such that their narratives often serve the interests of the White, neoliberal state. For student affairs practitioners that work in the trenches with Asian American college students, the greatest potential to engender resistance to this nuanced form of modern racism is in the praxis of empowering young Asian Americans with the capacity to articulate a counter-narrative to color-blind hegemony.

In the pursuit of race consciousness, however, it is important to note the complex relationship between ethnic identity salience, resilience in American society, and the possible psychic “costs” associated with adopting an Asian American racial identity. Throughout my data collection and analysis, it became clear that my participants’ adherence to an ethnicity paradigm served as a barrier to racial identification. While this is problematic for reasons discussed throughout this dissertation, ethnic identity might serve as a source of personal strength in the process of acculturation that first and second generation Asian American families experience. All of the participants in my study were second generation Americans; their parents came to America from different Asian countries. The ethnicity paradigm, with its toolkit of culture,
descent, language, and more offers individuals an identity through which to navigate an adverse racist system. More research needs to be conducted to better understand the personal resilience gained by ethnic identification, alongside the barriers to racial identification, as a result of the ethnicity paradigm of race.

Racial identification might offer group members a source of group consciousness and resilience in the face of White hegemonic racism, but more research must also be conducted on the psychic “costs” of adopting an Asian American racial identity. In an era of color-blind racism, individuals are offered a dominant narrative that tells them that race no longer matters and that they can achieve anything they want to within the American meritocracy. Moving from a post-racial ontology to a state of race consciousness might actually be a painful process for individuals as they awaken to the often silenced histories of oppression that make up part of the Asian American story. Furthermore, identifying as Asian American might require a shift in how one conceptualizes one’s own relationship with the nation state. Moving from a neoliberal, beneficent concept of America being “the land of the free” to an understanding of Asian American abjection and the central role of White hegemony in the American national project might be a high-risk and potentially psychologically damaging process for individuals. For student affairs practitioners and scholars of race, careful attention must be paid to these potential costs if we are going to advocate for racial identification and race consciousness.

Lessons Learned

As a neophyte qualitative researcher, I encountered, and perhaps produced, numerous challenges in my study of color-blind racism and Asian American college students. My examination of these challenges, in hindsight, has offered me numerous “lessons learned” which I hope to carry into my future research processes. My first lesson learned emerged as a result of
my choice to study the inner-workings of color-blind racism within a community of color. By and large, the scholarship on color-blind racism looks at either how it bolsters White power structures or how individual White subjects internalize and enact it. By seeking to examine this newest form of modern racism from a marginal perspective, I found very little theoretical or empirical work to help guide my interpretive journey from a similar perspective. I was able; however, to adapt the extant scholarship on how Whites engage with this racist power structure to suit the specific needs of my study. I found that this process of adaptation was both invigorating and frustrating, as I often had to conclude my analyses with a call for more specific research on how color-blind racism works within communities of color and Asian American communities specifically.

Secondly, I found myself working within the limited scholarly arena of college student racial identity development theory. The theorization of racial identity development in college students has yet to incorporate color-blind racism in any substantive way into its analysis of how college students develop this important aspect of their overall identities. Thus, the models available to me offered less utility because they appeared to assume that racial identity salience was both accessible to students and well-regarded in our society. Furthermore, college student racial identity development theory has yet to take an extended, comprehensive look at Asian American college students. The few models that exist to help map the racial identity development process of Asian American college students do not account for color-blind racism. I was able to learn and borrow from college student development theory as I pursued my own qualitative inquiry, but I often found myself in the weedy periphery of the discourse with more questions than answers.
My final challenge is entirely of my own construction. I designed this research study to examine the interplay between a hegemonic system and a subset of subordinated group members. My curiosity with the process of internalization and contestation led me to investigate how young adults might unknowingly engage in a complex relationship with hegemony in their meaning-making process. These research concerns led me to craft an interview protocol that was largely oblique and circuitous; I rarely asked the participants to directly share their ideas about color-blind racism, racial identity salience, or neoliberalism. I employed a narratological approach to elicit stories from the participants. Then I sought to counter-read the stories using a Critical Race Theory lens.

While all of this sounded highly feasible when I designed my study, the actual practice of analyzing and discussing my data was severely complicated by this approach. In writing my final chapters, I found myself repeatedly vexed and lost trying to make sense of the participants’ narratives through the organizational lens of my research questions. In reflection, I realized that my interview protocol, in all its postmodern, reflexive, semi-structured glory, only loosely mapped back to my research questions. My research questions were designed to suit me, the researcher, while my interview protocol was designed to engage the participants: college freshmen that possessed little vocabulary or theory to engage in a conversation about race, racism, and hegemony. As a result, my analysis and discussion of my data was limited by my own methodological choices, as I often had to engage in a lengthy calculus to connect what was buried in the participants’ stories with the scholarship on color-blind racism to produce a coherent interpretation.
Conclusion—A Case for Race Consciousness in an Era of Color-Blind Racism

So today, more than ever, opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies. (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 159)

The final portions of this dissertation were written in the early summer of 2013. While the weather these last few months has been quite tepid by Chicago standards, it has been a sweltering season for the politics of race. I decided to begin this conclusion with what might seem like an outdated appeal from two key scholars on race in America. In 1994, I was a sophomore in high school…and Omi and Winant were fighting against color-blind approaches to dealing with race and racism. Now, in 2013, I have more than doubled in age and a case for race consciousness could not be more important or relevant.

This summer, the Supreme Court of the United States voted to remove crucial segments of the Voting Rights Act. Chief Justice Roberts explained the ruling by arguing, “Our country has changed, and while any racial discrimination in voting is too much, Congress must ensure that the legislation it passes to remedy that problem speaks to current conditions…” (Williams & McClam, 2013). For those of us entrenched in the struggle for racial justice, this was a devastating decision and one that reveals the intense present commitment to color-blindness in American society. A few weeks later, a Florida jury found George Zimmerman not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin. In the twenty-seven pages of instructions that were read to the jury before the start of the trial, the words race, racism, or profiling do not make an appearance (Memmott, 2013). Journalists and scholars were quick to point out that the Zimmerman trial failed to account for racial elements that were central to the violence and murder in question. For me, the glaring lacuna between the racial reality of the Zimmerman case and Chief Justice
Roberts’ conclusion that “our country has changed” represents the danger and tragedy of color-blind racism.

Unfortunately, we exist in a moment where our Black President appears to subscribe to the neoliberal fallacy that rising tides lift all ships. In a recent interview with Black Enterprise Magazine (Dingle, 2012), President Obama was asked how he responds to the criticism that his administration hasn’t done enough for Black businesses. President Obama shared the following answer:

My general view has been consistent throughout, which is that I want all businesses to succeed. I want all Americans to have opportunity. I’m not the president of black America. I’m the president of the United States of America, but the programs that we have put in place have been directed at those folks who are least able to get financing through conventional means, who have been in the past locked out of opportunities that were available to everybody. (Dingle, 2012)

President Obama’s approach to countering race conscious systemic racism is a color-blind strategy of general economic reform. When taken together with a Supreme Court that appears to be marching in cadence, the outlook is bleak for racial justice in the new American millennium.

Hope, however, can be found broadly within the agency of praxis. For student affairs practitioners specifically, race conscious praxis can live in our everyday pedagogical and curricular engagement with college students. This research study emerged from my core belief that the college years represent an enormous opportunity for educators to help transform young adults into critical thinkers with the capacity for social justice praxis. My research findings speak to the hegemonic nature of color-blind racism and its ability to co-opt marginalized group
members into its system of White power. Concurrently, this study revealed an intense process of negotiation occurring for each of the participants as they attempted to weave together their own personal experience with the numerous, overlapping narratives of their families and communities. While any study of hegemony can be potentially demoralizing, I think that my research illuminated numerous opportunities where the participants’ meaning-making processes could be engaged and challenged with race conscious tools. It is within this praxis that a sense of agency exists to support our enduring struggle for racial justice.
References


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Part 1 – Focused Life History

1. Tell me about your life.
   a. Probe: What kind of neighborhood did you grow up in?
   b. Probe: How would you describe your parents or guardians?
   c. Probe: What is your cultural background? How do you identify your race?
   d. Probe: What was school like for you?
   e. Probe: What did you learn about your racial identity during high school?
   f. Probe: Did you learn anything about the history of Asians in America during high school?

Part 2 – The Details of the Experience

1. What challenges have you faced in your life?
   a. Probe: Have you faced any challenges in your journey to college?
      i. What was the college admissions process like for you? How did you pick this university?
   b. Probe: Were any of your challenges related to your race? Do you think your race had anything to do with the challenges you experienced?
   c. Probe: Why do you think you faced these challenges?

2. Did these challenges (I will reference specific challenges in the way I frame the question) tell you anything about our society?
   a. Probe: Did overcoming these (will reference specific challenges) challenges tell you anything about our society?

Part 3 – Reflection on the Meaning

1. So, what’s race got to do with life today?
2. What’s your racial identity mean to you?
   a. Probe: How did you come to that?
   b. Probe: Does society have any impact on how you think of your racial identity?
3. What did you learn about race in your home growing up?
4. What did you learn about race in your neighborhood?
5. What are some of your memories involving race?
   a. Probe: What role has race played in your life in school?
6. What, if anything, did you hear about Affirmative Action in your home growing up?
   a. Probe: What do you personally think about Affirmative Action?
7. Has race played a role in your life in college so far? In what ways?
8. Looking forward, do you think race will play a role in your college experience? In what ways?
   a. Probe: Looking forward, do you think race will play a role in your career after college?
9. Does racism exist anymore? How come?
10. These days, does everyone have equal opportunity to succeed in American society?
11. What do you think about the Obama being president? (If they don’t address race, ask about it specifically)
12. Do Asian Americans face racism? If so, in what ways?
13. Have you ever heard of Asian Americans being called “Model Minorities”? If so, what have you heard? (If not, inform them of the stereotype and then ask the following…) What do you think about this label?
APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Asian American College Students: Making Racial Meaning in an Era of Color-Blind Racism

What is the purpose of this research?
I am asking you to be in a research study because I am trying to learn more about Asian American college freshmen and how they understand their racial identity. You are invited to participate in this study because you are Asian American, at least 18 years old, a freshman at DePaul University, and you completed your K-12 education in the United States. This study is being conducted by Vijay Pendakur at DePaul University. The study is being conducted under the supervision of Ronald Chennault, the faculty advisor.

How much time will this take?
This study will take up to three hours of your time. An in-depth interview will take 90 minutes of your time, a potential secondary interview could take an additional 60 minutes of your time, and a follow-up meeting for quality verification will take 30 minutes of your time.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to complete a short brainstorming exercise. Then you will be asked to participate in a 90 minute interview. The interview will ask questions about your early life experiences, family culture, schooling, community contexts, your collegiate experience, the role of race in your life and in American society. If we cannot cover all the topics in the first session, we may have a potential second interview of 60 minutes. All interviews will be audio recorded using a digital tape recorder so that I can make accurate written notes of what you have said. When the transcript is completed I will schedule a follow-up meeting with you to make sure your words are accurately captured in the interview transcripts.

What are the risks involved in participating in this study?
Being in this study does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. For example, you might experience some awkwardness or discomfort answering interview questions about your racial identity, your childhood, and your experiences in school.

What are the benefits of my participation in this study?
You will not benefit directly from being in this study.

Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?
Yes, you can choose not to participate. Even if you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later. Your decision whether or not to be in the research will not affect your relationship with DePaul or the STARS program.

How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?
The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any report we might publish, we will not include any information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only the researchers will have access to the records that identify you by name. Some people might
review our records in order to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board may review your information. If they look at our records, they will keep your information confidential. The original recordings of the interview and the written copies of the interview transcripts will only be stored on a private password protected computer and located in a locked office. Any other study notes or documents will be housed in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s private office. You will choose a pseudonym during the consent process and the transcripts will not include your actual name. Since all the data will be de-identified, it will not be destroyed according to any fixed time schedule.

Whom can I contact for more information?
If you have questions about this study, please contact Vijay Pendakur at vpendaku@depaul.edu or 773 230 1229. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University’s Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at sloesspe@depaul.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

☐ I consent to be in this study. ☐ I DO NOT consent to be in this study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: _________________

Printed name: ___________________________