THE DUAL NATURE OF BIRACIALITY: TO BE AT ONCE CONFINED AND FREE

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On my honor I neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this thesis

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Abstract

Biracial individuals, as demarcated by having one white and one non-white parent, hold a unique social position in the United States. Situated in a white racial hierarchy, individuals of mixed races are, in some ways, caught between racial lines—they do not embody one racial category but rather two. Given that biracial individuals exist outside of established racial binaries, one is left wondering in what manner they racially identify. While some research argues that raced Americans (that is, those who are raced as non-white) are confined by their racial appearance and hence limited in ethnic identity options (Waters 1990; Gans 1979), more recent research finds that raced Americans experience a degree of opportunity and choice in the expression of an ethnic and/or racial identity (Khanna 2011). My research, situated between these two polar studies, finds that biracial individuals are at once both confined and free. Comprised of eleven interviews with biracial individuals across three racial categories (black, Asian and Latino), I ask: How do biracial individuals racially self-identify? In what manner and to what extent does phenotype affect the way in which individuals choose a particular identity? And how do individuals express their identity through ethnic and/or racial symbols? What I find is that, in support of Waters' (1990) and Gans' (1979) assertions, respondents' phenotypes greatly affect the way in which they racially identify—respondents tend to draw on racial and ethnic symbols opposite their phenotype in order to either fit in or stand out. In particular, I find that phenotypically non-white respondents draw on American ethnicity in order to claim white affiliation and assimilation. At the same time, however, respondents, like Khanna's (2011), maintain the freedom to draw on symbols of race and ethnicity. And regardless of phenotype, individuals predominately draw on symbols of non-whiteness to claim feelings of being different and unique.

The Dual Nature of Biraciality: To be at Once Confined and Free

Within the United States, a society denoted by rigid racial categories, biracial individuals (as defined by those with one white and one non-white parent) hold a very unique racial status. Expected to racially identify but lacking a racial category of their own, these individuals are left to flounder in an ambiguous and spasmodic space as they struggle to express an individual racial and/or ethnic identity of their own. Operating outside of the normative system of racial categorization, biracial individuals have historically been limited to claiming a mono-racial identity and thus confined to acknowledging only half of their heritage (Khanna 2011; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Waters 1990). According to Mary Waters (1990), Americans raced as non-white maintain fewer ethnic options than their white counterparts because of their additional "othered" racialization, whereby race trumps ethnicity. Often time, these raced Americans or phenotypically non-white individuals are regularly shadowed by the question of "What am I?"

In the attempt to reconcile individual and social perceptions of self, biracial individuals must navigate terms of social labeling, social expectations and phenotype. Challenging Waters' (1990) concept of racial confinement, Nikki Khanna (2011) finds that biracial individuals experience a sense of racial freedom to express their identity by drawing on symbols of race and ethnicity. These contradictory research findings raise several questions: How do biracial individuals racially self-identify? In what manner and to what extent does phenotype affect the way in which individuals choose a particular identity? And how do individuals express their identity through ethnic and/or racial symbols?

To address these questions, I interviewed eleven biracial individuals across three racial mixes (black/white, Asian/white and Latino/white) about their racial identities and experiences. I

found that my respondents' experiences, in a way, embody both Waters' (1990) and Khanna's (2011) contradictory findings—biraciality was both a matter of confinement and freedom. Like Waters (1990) found, respondents' non-white phenotypes, to some extent, entrapped individuals and forced them to claim their non-white identity. But while respondents felt, on the one hand, entrapped by their physical appearance, they also, like Khanna (2011) claimed, felt liberated by their ability to draw on a variety of racial and ethnic symbols. From my research, it became apparent that phenotype was a strong indicator of racial identification and I found that respondents often drew more heavily on symbols that contradicted their phenotype in order to fulfill the social functions of either fitting in or standing out. I also found that, regardless of phenotype, biracial respondents took immense pride in the unique social position they held.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the abolition of anti-miscegenation laws and hence the decriminalization of inter-racial marriage and relationships in 1967 (Townsend, Wilkins, Fryberg and Markus 2012:91), the United States experienced a wide influx of interracial marriages and offspring. Once established upon grounds of a black/white racial binary, racial categories and labels became complicated by the ambiguity that biracial individuals' racial identities posed. For many years, the unique racial identity of mixed raced individuals went by unacknowledged by official documentation as they occupied a very unique social space in terms of physical appearance, social labeling and self-identification. Confined by social structures of categorization such as the "one-drop" rule, biracial individuals were socially recognized in mono-racial categories and thereby deprived of claiming a biracial identity. And it was not until the 2000 Census that the opportunity for individuals to claim a multi- or biracial identity officially or legally arose (Townsend et al. 2012: 91). But how do these biracial individuals choose to self-identify? In

what way does one's physical appearance affect this conceptualization of identity? And how do individuals go about expressing their identity?

According to Waters (1990), ethnicity was not as rigid a structure as we once thought. Rather, there was an element of flexibility and choice evident in the expression of an ethnic identity. She argued that Americans maintained some control of their ethnic identity by drawing on various ethnic symbols available to them. It was through what Gans (1979) termed *symbolic ethnicity,* the method by which later generation ethnics utilize symbols extracted from older ethnic traditions to access that particular ethnic identity, that ethnicity became largely accessible and optional to most Americans (Khanna 2011; Waters 1996). Such symbols included celebration of ethnic holidays, wearing ethnic clothing and eating ethnic food. Ethnicity represented a sense of freedom and choice to select among a variety of familial ethnicities, the ones that offered the most functional and identifiable characteristics to the individual. The expression of an ethnic identity (or identities) offered not only a manner by which one can connect with others but also a forum to express one's uniqueness—a way to separate one's self from the rest of one's peers by highlighting what makes them "special" or "interesting" (Khanna 2011; Waters 1999).

At one time, the notion of flexible ethnicity was believed to be only available to white ethnics, as it was thought that other raced Americans in general were limited by their racial categorization (Khanna 2011). In this way, it was believed that race trumped ethnicity and, unlike white ethnics, raced individuals were forced to confront the racial label that society placed on them given their physical features. Some research has argued that the additional hurdle created by raced Americans' phenotypes force individuals, particularly black/white individuals, to claim a mono-racial non-white identity. The idea that people, whether conscious or not, strive

to maintain the dominant white racial paradigm, inadvertently places black Americans at the bottom of the social scale (Townsend et al. 2012) and leaves such individuals to feel they lack ethnic and racial options (Khanna 2011). When discussing mixed black Americans, in particular, it is important to note their historic relationship with the 1960 Jim Crow laws, unequal racial laws established by white southerners in the effort to maintain the white racial hierarchy proceeding the fall of slavery, and the "one-drop" rule that classified any American with so much as a "drop of black blood" as "black" (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008: 18-19). Mixed black Americans, therefore, were seen to be racially confined to expressing a singular racial identity that was well accepted and believed in the community.

Although the racial boundaries and definitions for raced Americans were more visible and appeared to be more constraining than for white ethnics, other research has found that black/white individuals, phenotypically categorized as black, have more options than was previously thought. Interviewing forty black/white biracial individuals, Khanna (2011) found that, like Waters' (1996) concept of symbolic ethnicity, black/white Americans also maintained some degree of choice and control over their ethnic identity through symbolic ethnicity. Her research demonstrated that black/white individuals not only drew on white ethnic symbols but also white racial symbols in order to express a biracial (rather than a white or black) identity. It was through *symbolic race*, the method by which individuals express race through symbols such as language, clothing and music (i.e., using "black" vernacular speech or dressing "white") that are more closely tied to concepts of race than ethnicity, that black/white individuals found freedom in expressing their biraciality. Individual usage of varying forms of symbolic race and ethnicity were situational and fluid—the degree to which racial and ethnic symbols were drawn upon depended on the function and benefit to the individual at the time.

Khanna's respondents (2011) predominantly drew on white racial and ethnic symbols when situated in predominantly white environments. Since individuals' black phenotypes socially prevented them from claiming a white identity, they drew on either ethnic or racial symbols of whiteness (such as wearing a Jewish star, highlighting their Italian ancestry or tailoring speech to sound "more white") to demonstrate their biraciality. By emphasizing their commonalities rather than their ethnic and racial differences, they were better able to connect with their white peers and reduce their "foreignness." Through the expression of a biracial identity, individuals were able to both assimilate into their social environment (by fitting in) and satisfy a need to be different and unique (by standing out).

Drawing on symbolic forms of race and ethnicity sanctioned few consequences for these biracial individuals and rather provided a number of benefits, namely the ability to form connections to their white counterparts and fulfill a desire to feel different and unique from others. However, the fact that most of Khanna's subjects (2011) largely drew on symbols of white ethnicity and race revealed a potentially counter-productive perpetuation of the white racial paradigm as opposed to an opposition to it. In this way, black/white individuals were able to avoid the negativity associated with being black by assuming certain white ethnic and racial characteristics. In some ways, by drawing on symbols of white ethnicity and race to claim a biracial identity, individuals negotiated black racial stereotypes by denying their pertinence to their life. Although beneficial to social acceptance, this process further maintained and perpetuated the established racial hierarchy.

As Khanna's qualitative research (2011) focused on the experiences of black/white individuals, Townsend et al.'s quantitative research (2012) explored a variety of mixed race individuals' experiences. Their research compared who, amongst black/white, Asian/white and

Latino/white individuals, chose to identify as biracial. Using surveys that asked both closed and open-ended questions about the way their respondents chose to racially identify, they found that racial and social class were key factors in determining whether individuals claimed a biracial identity or not. Individuals who came from more privileged (both socioeconomically and racially) backgrounds were more likely to claim a biracial identity. In this way, they found that middle to upper class respondents were more likely than their lower class counterparts to claim a biracial identity. In addition, they found that Asian/white individuals experienced the most racial freedom given their positive positionality in society, whereas the status of blacks and Latinos fluctuated on a more negative end. Hence black/white and Latino/white individuals were less likely to claim their biracial identity, often times opting to claim a mono-racial, non-white identity instead.

As most research has focused on black/white identity and conflict, I am particularly interested in the experiences of biracial individuals across races, namely those whose non-white identity is black, Asian and Latino. In a way, I wish to combine Khanna's (2011) qualitative methods with Townsend et al.'s quantitative research on biracial individuals to qualitatively investigate what it means to be biracial for different mixed races. Their research provided me with a foundation from which to operate, raising three main research questions: How do biracial individuals racially self-identify? In what manner and to what extent does phenotype affect the way in which individuals choose a particular identity? And how do individuals express their identity through ethnic and/or racial symbols?

METHODOLOGY

Over the course of three-and-a-half weeks, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eleven biracial students from a college located in Southern Colorado. (However, it should be noted that two of my participants graduated at semester and hence were new graduates of the college.) For the purpose of this study, I defined *biracial* as participants who had grown up in the United States with one white and one non-white parent. I looked specifically at three biracial categories: black/white, Asian/white and Latino/white. In total, I had three black/white, four Asian/white and four Latino/white respondents who agreed to participate in my study. As male participants were more difficult to find, my research ended with a total of three males and eight females.

Due to the limitation of qualifying biracial individuals within the college's student population, a convenience sample was used. My sample was non-random and purposively selected individuals so as to gather as racially diverse a sample as possible (in order to fill all three categories). Participants were contacted via email and from there I relied on snowball sampling, drawing on suggestions of other potential candidates from my subjects. I then emailed these potential subjects explaining my research and enquiring if they would be interested in participating in a voluntary interview about their experience.

It was difficult to understand exactly how my postionality as an outsider to biraciality would affect my subjects' responses. Although I am not biracial myself, I physically look Asian or ambiguously Asian and my subjects had a tendency to speak to me as if I was biracial, including me in statements such as "I'm sure you've gotten this before too" or "You know what

it feels like." Hence, in a way, I often *passed* as an insider and tried to be sensitive and careful not to prompt and guide the responses of my subjects.

Interviews were conducted, for the most part, in small, public rooms on the college campus. It should be noted that one interview took place in a coffee shop on the outskirts of campus and another in the dining room of one participant's house. All interviews were recorded using a handheld recorder as well as a personal laptop that was stationed inside the room and in close proximity to the participant and me. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes to an hour and began with a brief purpose statement and consent form explanation. From there, I asked open-ended questions, some of which were directed and some which emerged spontaneously.

Given that my research was roughly modeled after Khanna's 2011 article about ethnic and racial symbolism in black/white biracial individuals, I was predominately interested in how individuals chose to navigate their concept of race and identity in varying circumstances. Townsend et al.'s article (2012) also played a key role in the structure of my research as I chose to explore three typologies of biracial individuals, with the interest in how and if different mixed races experienced their biraciality differently. Specifically, I wanted to know if, when and how individuals chose to emphasize either their white or non-white racial and ethnic heritages. Interview topics included, but were not limited to, experiences at home, parents, self-perceptions of racial identity, public perceptions of their racial identity and changes in self-perception and identification (See Appendix A: Interview Schedule, for specific interview questions).

Although the entirety of the interview was recorded, I occasionally took handwritten notes while the interview was in progress. Each of the eleven individual interviews was meticulously transcribed, and all names and identities mentioned in the interview were protected

through terms of confidentiality. Data was collected from both the transcriptions and hand-written notes. I began coding my transcriptions for racial and ethnic symbols. I was generally guided by Khanna's (2011) differentiating definitions of ethnic and racial symbols—ethnic symbols refer to respondents' use of particular ethnic cultures (e.g., Italian, German), whereas racial symbols refer to respondents' use of symbols that relate directly to race (e.g., wearing "black" clothing or feeling "white" inside). These general thematic categories became the basis for further analysis.

Claiming an Identity

In seeking to answer the first of my research questions on how biracial people racially identify, I looked to my subjects' initial racial identifications and found that they provided a wide spectrum of answers that ranged from claiming a mono-racial to mono-ethnic to bi-ethnic identity. My eleven participants initially responded in the following ways when asked how they racially identify (organized in proceeding order of types from black/white to Asian/white to Hispanic/white individuals): black; black; black-Italian; half-Japanese, half-Norwegian; American; mixed; from New Hampshire; Mexican-American; white; half-Mexican; half-Salvadoran and half-German Jew (See Appendix B: Subject Information for more information). Although these were their initial responses, I found that as my interviews progressed, my respondents' concepts of self-identity fluctuated and changed, leaving their concept of self-identity fluid, confusing and ambiguous. Identity appeared to be a messy, schizoid unit of analysis that left me to ponder over my question on how biracial people racially identify.

Initially, my research pointed to three main ways of self-identification—claiming a mono-racial, a mono-ethnic or a bi-ethnic identity—before the element of fluidity took charge,

whereupon my respondents moved from one sort of self-identity to another. Although only three of my respondents (Dakota, Nicole and Timothy) identified mono-racially, none of them maintained a mono-racial identity throughout the entirety of the interview (hence I do not focus on initial mono-racial claims and the fact that two out of my three black/white respondents initially claimed mono-racial identities). Rather, they all fluctuated on how they racially identified by alluding to other ethnic or racial identities.

Dakota began our interview on the premise that she "grew up in a very white suburban neighborhood, [where she] was the only black student in school." Here she racially identified herself as being black and situated in an all-white environment. But later she claimed that her black heritage was not as dominant an influence as her mother's Italian influence, at which point, she seemed to claim more of an Italian ethnic identity than a black racial one. After a little prodding about how she saw herself racially, however, she conceded that she typically identified as black given that that was how others' perceived her. And once again she has taken us back to the idea of claiming a mono-racial identity. Later, however, she claimed: "I see myself equally as both and without the other's influence. I connect very deeply with stereotypical white culture and I connect very deeply with stereotypical black culture and I enjoy being parts of each." Identifying sometimes as black, sometimes as "half and half" or "white and black," she ended our interview by claiming her biraciality and both her white and black racial identities: "Since I was raised more white, I know that I act more white but I also feel black in the inside. It's kind of just a balance." Oscillating between a black and white racial identity and an Italian ethnic identity, it was clear that identity could not be simplified down to a single categorical unit. For my three respondents who identified monoracially (Dakota, Nicole and Timothy), claiming a

monoracial identity was not a rigid categorical conception but, like Dakota, a fluid and intermittent idea.

Interestingly, a fair number of respondents evaded the race question (as I specifically asked how they *racially* identified or saw themselves) altogether by focusing solely on their ethnicity (or ethnicities) instead. In claiming a mono- or bi-ethnic identity, my remaining respondents (all eight of them), in a way, claimed their biraciality through multi-cultural and ethnic identities. Similar to my three mono-racial respondents, my three mono-ethnic respondents' concepts of identity operated on terms of flexibility. Haley, a female who initially identified as American, proceeded to explain that with age, she began to draw more on her Indian and Muslim roots. At college, however, she felt she was much more "an American college student" than an Indian one, ultimately claiming that although others see her as "brown [she] feels very white." In this way, one ethnic identity was at times overpowered by other ethnic or racial identities. As Haley's Americaness was overrun, at times, by her Indian heritage, she remained quick to emphasize that she felt "very white inside" despite the fact that other people saw her as ethnically Indian (or racially "brown"). Thereby she claimed a white racial identity atop her American, Indian and Muslim ethnic identities. I have to wonder then if a biracial individual can truly even claim a single identity or whether identity is simply composed of a multiplicity of ethnic and racial influences.

My remaining five respondents who claimed bi-ethnic identities appeared to support this concept of a fluid, amalgamating self-identification process. Karen, a half-Japanese, half-Norwegian female, very clearly asserted her awareness of her bi-ethnic background: "I never grew up white or Asian. I never grew up with those terms, I grew up with half-Japanese and half-Norwegian, that was very, very clear and that's how I identify now." Despite these hard and fast

claims to a bi-ethnic identity, she later claimed that she and her brothers "joke that we're white. We grew up white…that's how my dad was raised, that's how my mom was raised, that's of course, how we are going to be raised." She, on the one hand, self-identified through her dual ethnicities (being half-Japanese and half-Norwegian) and on the other, discounted her entire ethnic background by claiming a white racial upbringing.

Among my respondents who claimed a bi-ethnic identity, only one initially claimed an ethnic-racial identity and yet, even he fluctuated in terms of how he identified throughout our interview. Attempting to avoid the notion of any sort of racial or ethnic identity, respondents such as Jordan, who initially proclaimed himself to be black-Italian, felt that he should not be confined to any sort of categorization:

> Racially, I see myself as I'm black and I'm Italian. Italian-African American. I don't know…I mean I identify as me and I have my parents and my brother as opposed to a more racial or ethnic identity, I suppose I have more of a familial one. But my stock answer is that I'm Italian-black.

He, simultaneously, attempted to both claim an ethnic-racial identity and discard the concept of a racial identity as a whole by claiming a "familial identity" before resorting back to his "stock answer" whereby he self-identifies both ethnically and racially. This sort of spasmodic interplay between claiming different ethnic and/or racial identities as evidenced through Dakota, Haley, Karen and Jordan's experiences were similarly found in all of my respondents' interviews.

Phenotype

Despite the ambiguity of racial self-identification, my second research question has to do with the factor of phenotype and how that affects the way in which individuals choose a particular identity. Appearance, as previous research has emphasized (Khanna 2011; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Townsend et al. 2012), plays a central role in the manner by

which individuals navigate their conceptualization and formation of a racial or ethnic identity. All of my subjects appeared phenotypically more non-white than white, with the exception of two Latino/white individuals who could "pass" as white (and one initially claimed a white racial identity). My respondents discussed at great length how the perceptions of their peers largely dictated the manner and degree to which their racial and ethnic identities were expressed and successfully claimed. Regardless of how non-white or white my subjects appeared, all remained susceptible to being raced based on their phenotypical appearance.

I found that racial identity was as much a personal choice as it was a reconciliation of social perceptions. For phenotypically non-white respondents, it was a matter of learning how to navigate through the context of pre-assigned social labels in order to express one's ethnic and racial identity. Often times, individuals chose the "easiest" route to social acceptance—namely they acknowledged their perceived non-white racial or ethnic identity *before* their white racial or ethnic identity. Hence, these respondents self-identified with their non-white side first, self-identifying as black-Italian, half-Japanese and half-Norwegian or half-Mexican. When identifying as half-non-white, it was interesting that only some of my respondents claimed a white ethnic identity (such as half-German Jew or half-Norwegian) as well. Many simply left their response at half-non-white, leaving one to wonder, what is the other half? In the United States, whiteness is so prevalent and normal that it is now an invisible presence, whereby if someone identifies as "half-Mexican," it is understood that the other half is white.

Although phenotypically non-white respondents verbally assumed a non-white identity first, they tended to draw mostly on symbols of whiteness. The reverse was found to be true for my phenotypically white respondents, as they tended to draw mostly on symbols of non-

whiteness. In a way, this created a cyclical process by which individuals drew predominantly on symbols that contradicted their phenotype in order to either fit in or stand out.

Phenotypically Non-white: Whiteness as Integration

Feeling trapped in their physical bodies, their image, my nine phenotypically non-white respondents felt, in some ways, confined by the racial label that society projected onto them. As Abby, a half-Salvadoran, half-German Jew female, divulged: "I feel like I have been forced to identify with my ethnic background and I don't think people that are white are forced to do that… it has become my identity." Later in our interview Abby continued to state that despite her phenotype, she felt internally white:

> I like to think of myself as white in the inside, and I talk white, I act white, I dress white and I do try and assimilate in those kinds of ways. I got defensive when the small minority groups at college first reached out to me like "Oh, you're one of us" and I was like "Noooo, like I'm not. I'm white—like I act white."

Given that my non-white respondents were perceived as "different" by their peers, they tended to draw on symbols of whiteness so as to "fit in." In this way, although Abby felt forced to accept her racial "othering," she experienced, at the same time, the freedom of drawing on her white race to assert her commonality to the general white population. Many of my non-white respondents made similar assertions as Abby (including Sarah, Michael, Karen and Haley)—although they felt the need to accept and explain their phenotype, they also found a sense of flexibility and freedom from their racial confinement by laying claim on their white affiliation.

Like Abby, Sarah was very aware of her phenotype and the way in which it affected how others perceived her. She talked about how people were "noticed always by their otherness" and that she was recognizably part Asian. She later explained that sometimes people refer to her as a "banana" or a "twinkie," a term that is meant to say, "Although you are Asian (or "yellow") on

the outside (physically), you are really white inside." In some ways, she felt akin to this sentiment and in some ways distant from it:

> It's hard because I'm not 100% Asian on the outside, that's just how they see me. So that perception is incongruent with my own feelings. I definitely feel very white—growing up in Minnesota, being part-white, not really having the Japanese side emphasized growing up…but that doesn't necessarily make me 100% white, you know?

Abby, Michael, Dakota and Timothy all shared similar sentiments as Sarah and felt that in order to navigate around one's non-white phenotype, one was required to accept their non-white appearance as part of their identity and at the same time, defy being labeled as mono-racially non-white by drawing on symbols of whiteness so as to "fit in." As Sarah later admitted in her interview: "I know I present sometimes more as an upper-class white in situations and that's partially just an acceptance into…whatever group—getting hired at a job versus whatever." Symbols of whiteness (e.g., acting white, feeling white, etc.) were used as tools to access social acceptance.

On a similar note, Dakota drew on symbols of whiteness in order to feel more socially accepted by softening or moderating her physical features that made her appear more non-white:

> I used to not want to go outside in the sun because I didn't want to get super tan and get darker. I used to straighten my hair all the time because I wanted my hair to look like my friends. So I definitely tried to change myself to kind of try and match a white standard.

Dakota's physical appearance functioned flexibly, just as her ability to claim a white racial identity did. Thereby she was able to manipulate aspects of her appearance to better fit in. Other respondents (Karen, Abby and Haley), who like Dakota had flexible phenotypes and looked ambiguously non-white, were able to transition between categories of race and ethnicity. Eight of my phenotypically non-white respondents clearly alluded to their ambiguous racial appearance

and the sort of freedom that accompanied it—claiming that people were not surprised when told that they were only half-non-white and half-white. Although my ambiguously raced non-white respondents were able to fluidly move between racial categories, they remained raced as non-white nonetheless and utilized, like their less ambiguously raced non-white counterparts, symbols of whiteness so as to better fit in.

Phenotypically White: Non-whiteness as Cultural Seasoning

Unlike their phenotypically non-white counterparts, my two phenotypically white respondents drew on symbols of non-whiteness in order to differentiate rather than assimilate. Given that all of my respondents were currently situated in a predominantly white college setting and most grew up in predominantly white environments, my phenotypically white respondents' appearances provided an initial sense of integration and assimilation—they were able to blend in, in a way that my phenotypically non-white respondents could not. In this way, they already "fit in" and therefore had no extra need to draw on their whiteness. Contingent upon situations, Lindsey spoke about the freedom she experienced in choosing whether or not to express her non-whiteness: "I think that if I was Mexican-American, living in Minnesota [laugh], I think that I would definitely drop the Mexican and just say that I was white." If it was easier or more convenient, white respondents had the option to simply claim a mono-racial white identity. My other phenotypically white respondent, Nicole, claimed that when "forced to choose" a racial identity, she tended "to pick white because it's easier." As both Lindsey and Nicole's phenotypes allowed them to blend in with the larger white population, they were not pressured in the same way as phenotypically non-white respondents were to express a non-white racial or ethnic identity.

In this manner, phenotypically white respondents exercised more freedom and choice in when and where they wished to express their non-white identity. I found that they utilized their non-white heritage to, in some ways, "season" themselves. By this, I mean, that in claiming a non-white ethnic or racial identity, my phenotypically white respondents were able to access a way to differentiate themselves and feel unique. As Lindsey claimed, "I think when I'm working it [her biraciality] to my advantage, I almost always draw upon the Mexican side because it brings in a different component to a discussion if I'm talking to all white people to be like, 'Oh well, I'm half-Mexican, so I can see both sides.' " There was a sense of empowerment, rather than entrapment (as was more the case with my phenotypically non-white respondents), associated with claiming a non-white identity. Nicole articulated similar sentiments as she described how she largely drew on her Hispanic roots because it differentiated her more than her mother's "very typical white American" background: "It's [her Hispanic roots] the most cultural [and] I felt [it] separated me from the norm. It's something to claim to and something that sets me apart in a way." By drawing on symbols opposite their phenotype, "white" respondents were able to differentiate themselves.

Being the Same: Symbols of Whiteness

In order to address the last of my research questions on how respondents draw on ethnic and/or racial symbols to achieve these two main functions (fitting in and standing out), I looked more closely at how respondents utilized and chose which ethnic and racial symbols to draw from. What I found was that many of my phenotypically non-white respondents drew heavily on American ethnicity in the attempt to fit in and that *all* respondents drew on symbols of non-whiteness to assert a unique sense of individuality.

As discussed previously, symbols of whiteness (such as "feeling white," "acting white" or "dressing white") functioned as a way for individuals to fit in and for my phenotypically non-white respondents to defy their phenotype and mono-racial categorization. However, respondents were not limited to drawing on blatant racial markers of whiteness, and I found that in order to assimilate into their predominantly white environments, my respondents predominantly drew on the white ethnic symbol of being American.

Although being American is a marker of ethnicity, I found in my research that American was also often synonymous with white. Therefore, being American operated as a symbol of both ethnic and racial identity—it became a *white* ethnic symbol. When asked what it meant to be white, Nicole replied:

> I think…being white largely means that you are from European descent. Kind of the sameness—a lot of the same people around you are similar—they come from similar (even though kind of different) but same sort of backgrounds. And like my mom's side of the family can trace their roots back to the Mayflower and places. So she has a very strong connection to America as a place.

Nicole, who began talking about whiteness as race, ended by linking whiteness to Europe, to the Mayflower and ultimately to America as a place. The connection of American ethnicity to whiteness was common for many other respondents as well (such as Michael, Abby, Lindsey and Sarah). This concept of a "white American" clearly emerged from my interviews when respondents spoke about their white parent and consistently interchanged American ethnicity with whiteness. Lindsey (like Michael, Haley, Nicole, Abby and Sarah) shifted between the words American and white, as if they were synonymous, while identifying her father's heritage and hence utilized the words Anglo-American, white and American all to describe her white side. The ethnic identity of being American was, in some ways, linked to the racial identity of being white and being like everyone else (i.e., fitting in).

Apart from using ethnic and racial words as synonyms, some respondents chose to favor one ethnic identity over another to display conformity. Abby openly talked about rejecting her El Salvadoran ethnicity in favor of an American ethnicity, telling her mother, "I just want to be American, like everyone else." She later explicitly clarified that "American is white in my world," and so for Abby, being American was, in some ways, being white. As with Abby, some respondents (including Michael, Haley and Sarah) drew on their kinship to whiteness, not only to de-emphasize their non-whiteness but also to attempt to assimilate.

For a long time, Michael drew on his white upbringing, focusing in on his geographical affiliation: "I sort of grew up with the New England culture, which is essentially white American […] and for the longest time [when asked "How do you see yourself racially?"], I was just like, 'Oh, yeah I'm from New Hampshire'." By drawing on his state of birth and upbringing, Michael verbally assumed the shared connection of what it means to grow up in a predominantly white northeastern state of the United States. In a way, his upbringing functioned as a symbol of race and white assimilation whereby he could connect more easily with his white peers by disassociating himself from his non-whiteness. Other respondents such as Karen, Sarah, and Nicole, also utilized their "American" or "white" upbringing as a way in which to distance themselves from their other more "foreign" ethnicity or race.

Being Different: Symbols of Non-whiteness

To the same degree that my respondents expressed a desire to fit in by drawing on symbols of whiteness and ethnicity, they also expressed a desire to stand out by drawing on symbols of non-whiteness and ethnicity. Experiencing great satisfaction and pride in the very characteristics that, at times, were shoved aside in order to assimilate became my phenotypically

non-white respondents' ultimate claim to uniqueness. Michael, who once used his state of birth as a way to avoid the race question, later re-appropriated his non-white Chinese ethnic and Asian racial heritage by claiming a *hapa* identity. *Hapa*, a derivative of a Hawaiian Pidgin word to mean "half" (generally speaking of half Asian, half white individuals), became something that set him apart:

> It's not really a common thing and so it sparks that conversation of race and identity and background, which I think is a really good thing. And so I think it's really funny when people are like "Oh, what are you?" and I'm like "I'm *hapa*." And they're like, "What?" And I'm like, "I'm half Asian—my dad's Chinese and my mom's—I don't even know what."

Emphasizing his father's ethnic and racial identity, he disregarded his mother's previously stated "American, European mutt" heritage by saying, "My mom's—I don't even know what." By drawing on his non-white ethnic and racial identity, he laid claim to something that "is not really common." He re-appropriated the very identity that he once cast aside in favor of fitting in, in order to claim a sense of uniqueness. Although not many of my respondents specifically reclaimed their identity as biracial, mixed or *hapa*, respondents such as Dakota, Abby, Haley and Nicole all spoke about a similar process of rejecting their non-white side at times so as to fit in, and later re-claiming that very identity they once rejected so as to stand out.

In this way, my phenotypically non-white respondents used symbols of non-whiteness to assert their unique individuality in the same way that my phenotypically white respondents did. Hence, the act of drawing on symbols of non-whiteness functioned to differentiate respondents, making them feel "special" and "unique," from a generally white environment and peer group. Karen linked her non-white ethnicity to her uniqueness, claiming that in emphasizing her non-white ethnicity and race, she was emphasizing what makes her different:

> I've definitely drawn on my Asianess more, just because no one would ask me, if I was just Norwegian, what my nationality was or what my race was. But when people ask me what I am, they're not looking for the Norwegian answer and so I think that just sets me apart […] I think we all want to blend in for the most part, I that's a typical thing to hear but, at least for me, I always took pride in the things that made me different.

It was being Asian and half-Japanese that made Karen stand out. Accessing her non-white heritage and identity functioned as a tool of uniqueness. All of my respondents (phenotypically non-white and white) similarly shared Karen's sentiments about the way in which their non-white heritage added an element of uniqueness to their character.

Although their non-white half played a large role in their sense of uniqueness, what many of my respondents were really emphasizing was their unique positionality as a biracial individual. Hence, their uniqueness manifested more in the fact that they were half-and-half—half-non-white and half-white—than simply being half non-white. As Dakota says:

> I think being biracial is just a very unique experience. I just don't feel confined in my race. I feel like I can take the aspects of both of those cultures that I agree with and the ones that I identify with and I can make those my own and leave the ones that I don't—I just feel like I can identify with a lot of minorities while at the same time kind of identify with what it's like to be white. But for me, I wouldn't say that I'm either [black or white], I'm just kind of in the middle.

For Dakota, as with most of my respondents (Lindsey, Sarah, Karen, Haley, Nicole, Michael, and Caroline), being biracial was, in some ways, about freedom. As most of my respondents appeared ambiguously raced, their phenotype acted to both free them from and confine them to partaking in the racial hierarchy and system of racial categorization. Despite the limitations associated with respondents' phenotypes, the majority of my respondents felt that their biraciality gave them a sense of racial freedom that further satisfied their desire to feel different and unique (as was supported by Lindsey, Sarah, Dakota, Karen, Haley, Nicole, Michael, Caroline and Abby's experiences). Like Dakota (a phenotypically non-white female), Lindsey

(a phenotypically white female) emphasized the degree of flexibility and freedom her bi-ethnic identity gave her: "I can use it to my advantage when I need to, that I'm Mexican or that I'm American."

Phenotypically white and non-white respondents alike used their biracial identity to assert a sense of either assimilation or differentiation depending on the circumstance. But ultimately the flexibility and adaptability of their biracial identity gave them not only a feeling of uniqueness but also racial liberty (they had the ability to *choose* how to racially and/or ethnically identify). To be biracial then was, in a way, the freedom to be everything and nothing at the same time—it was a constant struggle between the desire to fit in, to be "American," and at the same time, distinguish one's self as unusual and different.

DISCUSSION

This study contributed to the literature by investigating how biracial individuals across races racially identify in the United States. Unlike most previous research which looked specifically at either black/white biracial individuals (Khanna 2011) or the social factors that differentiated whether or not biracial individuals across races chose to identify biracially (Townsend et al. 2012), my study looked specifically at how black/white, Asian/white and Hispanic/white individuals racially identified. I found that, like Khanna (2011), my respondents drew on symbols of race and ethnicity in order claim a biracial identity and to, in some ways, free themselves from being raced as mono-racially non-white. Although most of my subjects (nine out of eleven) appeared phenotypically more non-white than white, two of my subjects (both Latino/white) appeared more phenotypically white. This slight variation in subject phenotype extended Khanna's previous and more narrowed research (2011). Surprisingly, what I

found was that, unlike Townsend et al.'s research (2012), there were no clear distinctions between the three biracial mixes. By this, I mean to say that the largest variation in identity patterns did not emerge from *racial* variation but rather *phenotype* variation.

After sifting through what seemed to be a hodge-podge of constantly fluctuating concepts of identity, I discovered that the concept of racial identity operated in terms of fluidity and that racial phenotype—the degree to which my respondents appeared more non-white or white—was the strongest indicator on how individuals chose to racially identify. My findings found that, like Waters (1990; 1996) and Rockquemore and Brunsma (2008), individuals who appeared phenotypically non-white experienced a greater degree of racial confinement than their phenotypically white counterparts.

In support of these assertions, I found that respondents' phenotypes dictated the way in which individuals navigated their conceptualization of racial identity. As nine of my eleven subjects were phenotypically non-white, the relationship between one's physical appearance and the perceptions of others was a frequent discussion in our interviews. Many respondents felt constrained and pressured by their phenotype to accept the racial label that society placed on them. However, Waters' (1990; 1996) and Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2008) research both emphasized that phenotypically non-white Americans had fewer ethnic options than their phenotypically white counterparts but what I found was that both phenotypically white and phenotypically non-white respondents alike felt constrained to identifying parallel to their phenotype. I found that my phenotypically non-white respondents (such as Abby, Karen, and Sarah) felt limited to claiming their non-white heritage prior to their white heritage, hence Karen was half-Japanese *then* half-Norwegian, while my phenotypically white respondents (Lindsey and Nicole) felt pressured to identify with their white heritage prior to their non-white heritage.

Although my subjects felt their phenotypes limited and dictated their default racial identification, I also found an element of choice in their conceptualization of a racial or ethnic identity. Just as Khanna's research (2011) found, my respondents experienced some degree of freedom to select, at will, the racial and/ or ethnic identities they wished to embody by drawing on varying symbols of race and ethnicity. In any given situation, individuals had the choice to draw more heavily on the heritage that was most beneficial to them at the time. Hence, like previous research found (Khanna 2011; Waters 1999), my individuals intermittently utilized symbols of race and ethnicity, drawing on either their white or non-white heritages, to either fit in or stand out. Unlike Khanna's research (2011) however, phenotype played a more important and extensive role in this process. Situated in predominately white environments, I found that my phenotypically non-white respondents largely drew on symbols of whiteness to fit in, while my phenotypically white respondents drew on symbols of non-whiteness so as to stand out. In this way, respondents drew more heavily on symbols that contradicted their phenotype to function as either markers of assimilation or differentiation.

I found that unlike Khanna's respondents (2011), who predominantly drew on symbols of white ethnicity (i.e., being Italian) and race (i.e., talking white), my phenotypically non-white respondents not only drew on blatant symbols of whiteness (i.e., feeling white, acting white, talking white, etc.), but also on the seemingly race-less symbol of American ethnicity. Although the term "American" (at least in the context used by my respondents) was meant to refer to one's cultural upbringing in the United States, my respondents (phenotypically white and non-white alike) used the term "American" to refer to whiteness. In this way, they endowed a racial meaning to an ethnic identity. By interchanging the words "white" and "American" (as Nicole, Abby, Lindsey, Haley and Sarah did), favoring an American ethnic identity over other non-white

ethnicities so as to downplay their non-whiteness (as Abby did) or using one's state of birth as a way to racially identify (as Michael did), being American came to mean being white.

For my phenotypically non-white respondents, drawing on their American ethnicity was a method of assimilation. It was as if to say, "I am more than my phenotype, and I am a lot more like my white peers than you think." By re-appropriating an already possessed ethnic identity to assert a white racial identity, they, in a way, combined Gans' (1979) and Waters' (1996) concept of symbolic ethnicity with Khanna's concept of symbolic race (2011), to create a single symbol of white ethnicity and race.

Although my non-white respondents predominantly drew on this symbol of whiteness in order to satisfy a desire to fit in, they also drew on symbols of non-whiteness to, like their white counterparts, stand out. Whiteness, given its long history of dominance in the United States, is normalized and largely invisible in society and hence, in order to differentiate from this norm, individuals drew on symbols of non-whiteness. Predominantly drawing on not only their non-white side but also their biraciality as a whole, individuals claimed a feeling of distinction. As both Khanna (2011) and Waters (1999) demonstrated, being biracial (having the option to draw from either white or non-white heritages) offers individuals an avenue to feelings of uniqueness. In this way, my respondents operated on terms of racial freedom—they freely chose when to draw on symbols of whiteness (to fit in) or symbols of non-whiteness (to stand out). As supported by previous research (Khanna 2011; Waters 1996), this freedom signified the malleability of racial and/or ethnic identities for biracial individuals.

Nestled between the works of Waters (1990; 1996; 1999) and Khanna (2011), my research has demonstrated that although biracial individuals' phenotypes confine their racial

identity options to an extent, they also experience some degree of freedom and opportunity to choose their racial identity. This sort of contradictory dual concept of identity (to feel both confined and free) embodies biracial individuals' experiences and conceptualizations of racial self-identification.

CONCLUSION

Being Biracial: The Experience of Racial Freedom

Biracial individuals occupy a vulnerable and, in some ways, existential position in which the question "What are you?" is a constant reminder that they do not "belong" to any one racial or ethnic group. For white people, the question of race is unproblematic and largely non-existent given that whiteness has been normalized in the United States to such an extent, that it is now rendered invisible. For recognizably non-white people, the concept of racial identity is not particularly troublesome given that they "fit" into the system—they hold a categorical racial position. But for biracial individuals, who exist between lines of racial categories, the concept of a racial identity is about marginality and freedom.

In a society premised on a black/white binary, these individuals are expected to claim a racial identity in a system where they do not hold a concrete racial category but are nonetheless mono-racially categorized based on their phenotype. My research found that biracial individuals across races (particularly, black, Asian and Latino) developed fluid and transformative notions of a racial identity in order to navigate their marginalization. Operating outside of normative racial categories, respondents were forced to emphasize the racial and/or ethnic identities opposite their phenotype in order to prevent being categorized mono-racially. By the same token, respondents also drew on symbols contradictory to their phenotype so as to fulfill one of two functions—

fitting in or standing out. In this way, I found that phenotypically non-white respondents mostly drew on symbols of whiteness so as to fit in and phenotypically white respondents mostly drew on symbols of non-whiteness so as to stand out. This created a cyclical process that functioned to combat the concrete structures of social racialization.

Although the conceptualization of a racial identity for biracial individuals was a place of great confusion, vulnerability and ambiguity, it was also a place of choice. I found that individuals operated in a space of both confinement and freedom. Apart from the limitations of their phenotype, they were free to draw on a number of ethnic and/or racial resources in order to fulfill a social function of either assimilation or differentiation. Thus, they maintained a flexible option to assert their commonalities or differences depending on what was most beneficial to their circumstance. Although my findings were largely supported by previous research, my findings shed new light on symbolic white ethnicity and race. I found that despite phenotype, it was widely believed that American ethnicity meant white raciality and that phenotypically non-white respondents emphasized their Americaness in order to emphasize assimilation.

Although all respondents were keen on successfully assimilating into the white culture they were positioned in (hence phenotypically non-white respondents predominately drew on being "American" as a racial white ethnic symbol and phenotypically white respondents utilized their phenotype to blend in), I found that they were also keen on successfully differentiating themselves as unique and different by drawing on symbols of non-whiteness. Ultimately, being biracial meant occupying a unique social position where one was forced to navigate through the confining nature of one's phenotype while at the same time, enjoy the freedom of picking and choosing racial and/or ethnic characteristics that were most circumstantially advantageous to one. Being biracial was to be at once confined and free.

Future Research

Based on these findings, there are at least three areas for future research and investigation. First, few of my respondents focused on how they invoked symbols of race and ethnicity in predominately non-white contexts. I found that in white contexts, my respondents across the board drew on racial and ethnic symbols to either fit in or stand out, but how does this differ in non-white contexts? Would it simply be the reverse of what I found—that phenotypically non-white respondents would draw on symbols of non-whiteness to fit in and symbols of whiteness to stand out? Would non-white respondents draw on symbols of whiteness to access racial privilege as Khanna (2011) found? Given that most of my respondents grew up and socialized in predominately white environments, future research should investigate how biracial individuals operate in predominately non-white environments.

Secondly, only one of my respondents drew on non-white racial and ethnic symbols to freely claim a mono-racial identity. By freely choose, I mean to say that only one respondent deliberately chose a mono-racial identity as opposed to those who felt forced to claim a mono-racial identity given their phenotypes. Timothy, a self-identified black male, talked about positively embodying black culture in order differentiate himself as a minority, but under what circumstances is this possible? My findings showed that phenotypically non-white individuals, such as Timothy, wished to assimilate before differentiating but he seems to reverse this finding, why? More research therefore should be done to look into the benefits of biracial individuals claiming a mono-racial identity.

Lastly, the population from which I drew on attended a small predominately white, upper middle class, liberal arts college in southern Colorado. My sample therefore was largely

comprised of financially privileged individuals, who, according to some research, have access to more racial freedom given their class status (Khanna 2011; Townsend et al. 2012). A few of my respondents, who came from less affluent backgrounds, focused more on the aspect of class than race. Respondents such as Jordan, a black-Italian male, largely spoke about racial animosity and violence that contradicted the general experiences of my other respondents (many of whom focused on environments of racial acceptance rather than rejection). Hence future research should investigate the role of class, particularly the influence of middle to lower class, on racial identity.

Additionally, given my time constraints and therefore limited sample, my research and findings provide only a very narrow insight into the way in which biracial individuals across races racially identify. Although I found that there were no significant differences across my three types of racial mixes—by this, I mean to say, I did not have enough data so as to clearly differentiate between the racial categories—future research should seek to explore larger samples of each category especially given that two of my three black/white individuals initially self-identified as black and one of my three Latino/white individuals as white.

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Interview Schedule

Purpose statement:

I'm really interested in how biracial individuals, such as yourself, understand their racial identity.

Interview Questions:

Family Background/Culture:

1. I'm really interested in the way you grew up—what your community, your homelife, your friends, your family were like.
    a. What was your community (and school) like in terms of diversity (both racially and socioeconomically)?
    b. Growing up, did you experience drastic shifts in community (such as moving to and living in a very different place)?
2. Can you tell me about your parents?
    a. Their occupations? How they met?
        1. Did they encounter any complications in their marriage that related specifically to their differences in either race and/or ethnicity?
    b. What are your relations with both sides of the family--are you closer with one side of the family? Why so? Has it always been like this?
    c. Did parental expectations (i.e., importance of school work, family, etc.) differ between parents? Why?
3. Did your family ever address the topic of race? Did your parents offer you any advice or support as to how to navigate the world in terms of race?

Identity and Society

4. How do you see yourself racially?
    a. [if subject identifies as biracial] What does it mean to be biracial?
    b. [if subject chooses to identify with one race over another] Can you explain why you identify with a particular racial category?
        1. [if subject does not respond with a specific racial category such as Korean, Italian, etc] In addition to your racial identity, do you have a different ethnic identity? By ethnic identity I mean a shared cultural identity (ie Italian, Korean, etc)?
        2. What does it mean to be BLANK (Chinese, Jewish, etc)?
5. How do you respond to people when asked what you racially identify as? Or as some ask, "what are you?"
6. What factors do you think influenced your racial identity?

   a. How does your physical appearance affect your own racial identity? And does your physical appearance create any tension between your own racial self-identification and the way others perceive you in terms of race?
   b. To what extent do you think/feel your physical appearance affects people's perceptions of you in terms of race?
      1. Can you remember a time when you felt "raced"? I'm referring to a time in which people acted towards you predominately because of the way they identified you racially or hence "raced" you. How did you feel? How did you respond?

Changing Times/Places [Identity Fluidity]

7. How do you express this identity to others (in terms of self-presentation: clothing, food, language (accents), holidays, sports, entertainment, music etc.)?
   a. Do you find that you emphasize different characteristics of your racial and/or ethnic identity more so than others when you're with different groups? Explain. Could you give some examples?
      1. For example: home life, school (college), sports, peer groups (drinking, dancing, hooking up?)
         a. Peer groups at home vs school, mother vs father's family, sport choices, food preferences
8. Has your understanding of your racial identity changed over the years? If so, in what manner and for what reasons?
   a. Coming to college
   b. Life outside of college (jobs held over the summer or off campus, etc.)
   c. Expectations of changes
9. Anything else?

Subject Information

Racial Category	Name- Male (M) or Female (F)	Racial Mixes (Maternal/Paternal)	Initial Racial Identification
Black/White	Timothy (M)	Black/White	Black
	Jordan (M)	Italian/Black	Black-Italian
	Dakota (F)	Italian/Black	Black
Asian/White	Karen (F)	Norwegian/Japanese	Half-Japanese and Half-Norwegian
	Sarah (F)	White/Japanese	Mixed
	Haley (F)	Iowan/Indian	American
	Michael (M)	American/Chinese	From New Hampshire
Latino/White	Lindsey (F)	Mexican/Anglo-American	Mexican-American
	Abby (F)	El Salvadoran/German Jew	Half-Salvadoran and Half-German Jew
	Nicole (F)	White/Hispanic	White
	Caroline (F)	White (Jewish)/Mexican	Half-Mexican

*To be noted: I used the subjects' explanations of their parents' racial heritages to determine what terminology to use under "Racial Mix." As I say in my paper—the racial identifications and labels assigned to both their parents and themselves fluctuate to an extent (for example, Michael defined his mother at times as either American, white or Anglo) and for this matter, I generally used their initial responses.