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### **Color between the Lines: Navigating Mixed Race Identity**

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Color Between the Lines: Navigating Mixed Race Identity

Kelly O'Halloran

College of the Holy Cross

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### Author's Note

I would like to thank the tireless effort of my advisor, Professor Mark Freeman, who has worked diligently and patiently with me, helping me achieve my goals as a writer and a thinker. Through his tenacity of challenging me to reach my potential, I know that my thesis could not have been done without him. I'd also like to thank Professor Kirschner, the former Director of the College Honors Program. Being able to be a part of the College Honors Program has opened up many opportunities for me as a student. I am also grateful for Professor Sweeney, the current Director of the College Honors Program, for continuing on this passion and guidance. Thank you to my reader, Professor de la Paz, who guided me towards writers and ideas that will continue to inspire me. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends. With their support, I have found the confidence and momentum to complete this thesis with passion.

### Abstract

Through the qualitative work of narrative psychology, this thesis explores experiences of mixed race individuals who have one white parent, one minority parent, and who grew up in a predominantly white community. The data were drawn from the author's own first-hand experiences as well as in-depth interviews from three Holy Cross students about their mixed race identities. On the basis of these data, three forms of self-identity were found to be especially salient: the *unaware self*, the *unique self*, and the *liminal self*. The unaware self can be understood as not knowing how one appears to others. The unique self is manifested in a desire to feel special in comparison to others. The liminal self is experienced as a state of "in-betweenness," in the sense of not feeling fully a part of either racial background. The liminal self could be experienced negatively, as if one has to choose which racial group to identify with or when one feels one is only entitled to half a voice. However, the liminal self could also be experienced as a "positive marginality" (Daniel, 1996), as when one sees one's mixed race identity as an opportunity to explore one's multifaceted nature and connect with multiple social worlds.

## Prologue

When I was in elementary school, we would have art class every Thursday. We would build clay dinosaur sculptures, paint animals with our fingers, and draw self-portraits. I would leave school with a giant folder filled with my creations that would stick together after a long bus ride home. When I walked through my front door, I would show off my art to my parents and would continue drawing and painting on any surface I could find. Never once did my parents tell me to color between the lines. In fact, they enjoyed the messiness of my childhood creativity. I enjoyed running my crayons over the white spaces of coloring books, on top of the black lines and over the white spaces once more. I would move my crayons in circles, mixing together my favorite colors of hot magenta with cerulean, creating a sweet lilac shade of purple until the paper turned waxy.

The way I saw color at this young age was led by my tattered crayon box. I instinctively grouped together the colors for grass, the colors for flowers, and the colors for people. I knew that I had this understanding, this aesthetic eye, in which tonal shades of light and darkness should be used to portray what I saw. I saw the world with bright eyes, capturing the beauty and details of what was around me, comfortably taking in the colors of the people in my life. But, most of the people surrounding me were made up of similar tones of milky white skin or pale tints mixed with specks of freckles. Perhaps my aesthetic eye was too strong. Perhaps deeply noting the analogous colors of my world without taking a moment to see myself only gave me a one-sided view of who I was. My childhood drawings and my memories of identity at this young age painted me as white. I painted myself as white.

But, white was only part of me. White was only half of me. The other half, the half that took over my skin and features, yet seemed to lay dormant just beneath the surface of my

identity, was Filipino. It was not until the colors of the people around me began to diversify that this part of me emerged. I became more aware of my apparent differences, my mother's cultural stories, and eventually, societal groupings, shaping many layers of my mixed race identity. I realized how my desire to be unique was paired with a desire to fit in, often leaving me in a stage of liminality (Turner, 1969), a state of in-betweenness in this culturally segregated society. I found myself as this ambiguous color found in between the lines of race.

Though in recent times in my life, I attempted to be the one to blur the racial palette of other people; I wanted to use my blended background as a bridge between my two halves. Yet, throughout the journey of this thesis, I found that perhaps attempting to serve as a link between two races is not my role. I even began asking myself: how could we blend away the social lines of race without interfering with the beauty of being different, uniqueness of culture, and curiosity of an outsider's perspective? What do we lose when we try to not see color? We might lose the complexities that make up the human experience. We might create a barren false reality of our lives. Instead, I want to be the color between the lines of race, one that is not afraid to step one foot into a racial sphere that is not fully my own.

## Introduction

My mother was born and raised in the Philippines and my father is Irish-American. Growing up in a small town in Connecticut, my family was one of the few racial minorities in the area. I wanted to understand how my identity has been shaped by having a father who does not quite look like me, having parents who come from two very different cultures, and from growing up in a predominantly white community. I sought to understand how I have come to see myself as this ambiguous color found in between the lines of race.

During my first few months at Holy Cross, I began to think more deeply about race. From attending talks for my first-year seminar to writing essays in psychology on the social issues surrounding race, I became immersed in the subjects of race, culture, and identity. My coursework began to seep into my own self-reflections; gradually, I started placing my own mixed race identity into what I was learning.

Out of my curiosity for understanding my identity, I began asking myself many questions: how have I come to form my own mixed race identity? How does my racial identity play a role in my relationships with others? How do other people perceive me? All of these questions exist in the context of where I grew up, the races and cultures of my family and peers, among many other aspects of my life.

Before attempting to answer these exploratory questions, I came to this thesis with ideas of my own, ones that have cultivated over the years. I thought that being able to call myself mixed race was a unique aspect of myself, something that my peers could not relate to. Yet, a part of me also knew that that uniqueness was only a label. I knew my initial understanding of myself was white. When I would initially think of myself or think of people who I could relate to, I immediately pictured whiteness. Sometimes, I would forget that I'm only half of the race of



my peers; I would forget that I'm only half white. This understanding of how I identified myself guided me to look to the race of the people around me. I attributed my racial identity to the whiteness of my town. Heading into this thesis, I hypothesized that the identity of mixed race individuals may be more a result of the race of the people surrounding them than their own race. Another idea I came in with was that mixed race individuals might have a heightened ability to serve as the link between their two halves. As we relate to both white peers and peers of our minority racial background, we might be able to act as the connective middle-person, bringing people together. Both of these hypotheses provided me with a starting point, a direction to look into. Yet, soon after exploring my own stories as well as the stories of others, I found that these speculations about mixed race identity are rooted in much more complex ideas.

In the attempt to find deeper understandings, I reflected back to my own memories beginning as early as six years old. I continued to navigate my way through important experiences up until very recent memories, all of which have shaped my identity as a mixed race individual. I also wanted to learn about the unique experiences of other people who identify as mixed race. Their stories might supplement my own and also open up new areas of discussion beyond my personal experiences. Through the process of exploring people's lives, including my own, I can gain a deeper understanding of how some mixed race individuals might develop facets of their identity. The findings from this research might not be applicable to all, due to the intricate nature of human lives; but, they may be able to shine light on some truth, to open up some relevant questions of how individuals of mixed race might understand themselves in the context of our current world.

Only fairly recently has psychological and sociological literature begun to research this racial demographic. Since the 1990's, mixed race identity has become an area of intellectual

interest; with the U.S. population of mixed race individuals growing from 5% in 1980 to 14% in 2015 (Bialik, 2017), this topic of research remains prevalent in current American society. Much of the research conducted is based on Poston and Root's original 1990's models, which explore generic steps toward mixed race identity development. Other research examines broad social situations, such as that being of a higher social class influences one's likelihood to identify with their "lower status" racial identity (Daniel, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001; Yancey, 2003).

While these studies are thought provoking and necessary to use as a framework, I decided to follow a qualitative approach, one that explores the intricate life stories of individuals, including my own. I used narrative psychology, an interpretative approach to psychological inquiry that seeks in-depth understandings of the phenomena of human experience (Freeman, 2009). By pulling theories from Mark Freeman, existential psychologist Rollo May, and philosophical psychologist William James, among many others, I am able to reflect upon my own experiences of developing my mixed race identity from a psychological perspective. I applied some of their theories and concepts to autoethnography, an autobiographical genre of writing that explores the multiple layers of consciousness. I used my personal experiences to understand how one might individually experience life in the broader cultural context (Chang, 2008). I also interviewed mixed race students at Holy Cross who are half white, half a racial minority, and who grew up in predominantly white communities for the reasons that their stories may resonate more with mine and also to find a steadier streamline of themes. Through asking them open-ended questions that would initiate them telling stories of their experiences, I was able to explore aspects of their identity (Josselson, 2013). Together, I have extracted themes

from their stories that resonate with mine, connecting and contrasting the diverse experiences that some individuals of mixed race identity might face.

Throughout the next three chapters, this thesis will delve into a roughly chronological framework of development looking at myself; Scott, a half-black and half-white male from New York; Lily, a half-Filipino, half-white female from New England; and Ariana, a half-Hispanic, half-white female also from New England. Beginning with memories and stories describing the first time we acknowledged our mixed race identity, the thesis will continue to explore cultural influences and will end with our respective college experiences of navigating our mixed race identity. By untangling our developing identity into three chapters based on appearance, culture, and society, I explore the different layers of the self. The first chapter, *Melanin: Identity Through Appearance*, focuses on how individuals understand themselves based on their own appearance or the appearance of others, being their skin tone, hair texture, facial structure and more. The second chapter, *Beneath: Identity Through Culture*, looks beneath the surface and into how one's minority parent's culture plays a role in one's identity development. Finally, *Beyond: Identity Through Society* extends beyond one's heritage and looks at how individuals identify themselves in the context of stereotypes and racial separation in groups of people. While these layers of identity might form in this chronological order, they are still apparent throughout the entire lives of some mixed race individuals.

Embedded within these layers of identity are three different selves: an *unaware self*, a *unique self*, and a *liminal self*. These three selves are apparent within our identity through appearance, culture, and society. They intertwine with one another, emerging in moments in time and throughout larger phases of our lives. These three selves seem to play a role in the plurality

of some mixed race individuals; this multifaceted nature is what will be explored throughout the rest of this thesis.

## Chapter 1: Melanin: Identity Through Appearance

*An Unaware Self*

When I was a child, I did not know who part of me was. I knew my name, where I lived, the members of my family; yet many other aspects of my identity seemed to pass by me. Like most children, I only experienced my life moment to moment, hardly ever reminiscing about the past, planning for the future, or crafting my identity. My childhood self rarely paused to look in the mirror, never flipped through photographs, or contemplated who I was. Everything to me seemed how it should be. I felt normal. I felt the same as everybody else. But to others? I was different, unique, exotic, darker. I was a half-Filipino growing up in a small, white, New England town tucked into the northwest corner of Connecticut. My Filipino side dominated my features, coloring my skin and darkening my hair. However, I did not feel or even see myself in this way. As obvious as my racial minority status was to the white community that surrounded me, the experience of being half-Filipino, or a racial minority in general, was such a distant, part of my identity, an identity which I was almost entirely unaware of.

I can remember a handful of times when other people projected their curiosity onto me by questioning where I came from and what I was. Many of these questions took place during a stage that I am here calling an *unaware self*, when I could not think from another's perspective and when I simply did not know how much I stood out. The very first memory I have of someone else wondering about my identity took place in the first grade:

*Today is Father's Day. I'm standing alongside the dandelion yellow wall of my first grade classroom. A sea of bouncing children floats behind the corner of cubbies. Every child is paired with his or her father, creating a patterned skyline of tall and short figures sweeping across the room. I spot my teacher, Mrs. Leifert, just a few steps away.*

*“Mrs. Leifert!,” I yell, cranking my chin upwards. “This is my dad!”*

*My teacher’s brown eyes widen in delight and she settles her eyes on my father, shaking his hand. As my father talks to my teacher, I survey the room, looking for familiar faces amongst the crowd. I feel a light tap on my shoulder, repetitive enough to realize it’s purposeful. Swinging my head around, a girl with light freckles placed on her forehead and nose stares at me inquisitively. Her father standing behind her towers over the both of us, wearing an almost identical pattern of freckles on his face.*

*As she examines my father behind me, the girl asks, elongating each syllable, “Are you adopted?” My chin tilts to the side and my eyes widen out of sheer wonder.*

*“No?” My response blends upwards into a question. Though I know the answer, I don’t understand the reason behind what she is asking. I look to my father and he reads the perplexity in my eyes. He explains to the girl gently. “Her mother is from the Philippines, so she looks a lot more like her.”*

*Picturing my mother in my head, I see her black hair, short stature, and tan skin. Looking at my father again, I notice he is bigger, has brown hair, and his pale Irish-American skin is dotted with light freckles and other specks of pastel.*

*I still don’t get it.*

Though this memory is only a snippet of that day, it left an impression that was stamped on my brain for over a decade. Why did this particular moment not become one of the forgotten pieces of history left in my unconscious? I find it difficult to believe that it could be due to sheer confusion. Is it not true that as children we experience so many confusing moments that almost everything presented to us is essentially new and must be learned? I have to believe that something else is going on.

When the girl asked me whether I was adopted, I remember feeling confused, but not offended. Perhaps this confusion made me think for the first time about why this question was being asked. Perhaps this was the start of my gradual realization, when I actually looked down at my own hands and saw that they were not a smaller replica of my father's, that the hands who fed me, bathed me, watched over me all these years looked different than my own. At some point after this moment, I must have become aware of my darker appearance.

This brings me to what may seem to be a surprising question: Why did I not realize that I looked different? Surely, the people I was surrounded with noticed, and while they may have kept their perceptions of me to themselves, how could it be that I was never aware that I was and looked like a mixed race individual?

Research has shown that the unaware self may be common in mixed race people. It has been found that the racial composition of our social networks influences the way we identify with our biracial heritage (Brunsma, 2005; Hall, 1980). My social networks, including my classmates, teachers, neighbors, the cousins on my father's side, and my father himself, are all white. Almost every hand that I shook was pale, most people's hair was blonde or brunette, and many eyes that looked at me were light. I was so engulfed by this narrow spectrum of colors in my life that I was unaware that I did not look like everyone around me. I was also at a stage in my life in which I could not see from another's perspective. Piaget's (1950) stage of egocentrism sets the foundation for why I could not see that others would perceive me as different. Instead, I internalized what I saw around me. My perception of the lighter complexions of others washed over me, staining my self-image, painting me as white.

Since this research aligns with my unaware self, I wanted to know: do other mixed race individuals, especially those who grew up or currently live in predominantly white communities,

have similar thoughts to mine? Were others also unaware of their mixed race selves earlier in their lives?

After interviewing several mixed race minority students at my school, I found underlying similarities within our unaware selves, which emerged in our early childhood. Our unaware selves formed at a time when the social construct of race may have influenced others' judgments of us before we understood race ourselves.

Scott is a college senior from New York who identifies as half-black and half-white. As a child, he often moved from town to town, and was raised primarily by his paternal grandparents. His grandfather is Italian and his grandmother is Afro-Puerto Rican. Growing up in a predominantly white community, yet with more diversity than my small town, he spoke about being, at first, unaware of his racial background. Yet, his awareness was eventually brought on by the curious questions or jokes from his peers about his white half-brother. He said:

The joke was always made. I'm not sure when I first started to hear it, but everyone would always ask if I was adopted. Whether they knew I was or wasn't, it was kind of an off-handed joke. That was probably the first time I was aware of it, at age eight or ten...[But,] maybe fifth grade is too early to really be thinking about [racial identity] as a kid.

Before this question was asked, Scott did not think about the contrast in complexion between him and his half-brother. Instead, Scott saw him and his sibling as a cohesive pair, the "Campanelli Brothers," as people called them. It was a nickname that stuck, one that seemed to render a truth about how Scott perceived their close relationship. He wondered about being unaware of his racial identity prior to these jokes. As visible as the differences were within my family and Scott's family, we both were surprised that other people would even question our cohesiveness or our relatedness within our own families. Growing up in predominantly white areas, it makes sense that young children might question our minority status. Yet, this



questioning may have taken place so early on that we did not yet internalize these perceptions of ourselves.

Lily is a half-Filipino half-white college senior who grew up in a fairly wealthy, predominantly white town in New England. Her mother moved from the Philippines when she was 30 years old, and Lily has visited the Philippines every summer ever since she was a baby. She described one of the first moments when someone pointed out a distinct feature of hers, one that Lily was unaware had derived from her half-Filipino background.

“A weird thing was facial structure,” Lily explained. “My friends would make fun of me for having a wide nose and I didn’t think of that in terms of it coming from [my] genes from a place. That was in elementary school.” Because Lily did not understand that her appearance was an indicator of her racial background, she still existed as an unaware self.

For myself, Scott, and Lily, our features, which were distinct from some of our family members and our peers, attracted comments and questions from our young classmates. However, it was not until later in our lives that we understood the reasons behind these questions. Time would be the only barrier between being unaware of our appearance and being conscious of the everyday implications of our mixed race identity.

*A Unique Self*

Between the years of first grade and third grade, something began to change. It was not until small moments of understanding myself in comparison to others that I gradually began to see my mixed race identity as unique. In my early childhood, I became drawn to anything that was Filipino. Clothes that were made in the Philippines were special to me. I chose to do school projects on the Philippines and I constantly asked my mother if we could visit. I was proud of my background and the special traits that belonged to me and not to others. This shift in my racial identity took place within just two years of my life. It makes me question: how did I go from being unaware of my darker features to feeling unique and special because of them? Part of this transition might have been from gaining access to people who could stand as points of comparison. Davis-Kean (2009) explores how crucial social comparison is during middle childhood, the ages from six to eleven, and how it can help us value ourselves in a more realistic way (as cited in Berger, 2008).

Around the second or third grade, I started to become friends with Reyna, a girl in my class who is from the Philippines. I can imagine my mother meeting Rey's parents at a school event or gathering. I can guess that she gravitated towards Rey's mother and father, and perhaps, out of that small friendship came the suggestion that Rey and I should become friends:

*It's a warm afternoon, just a few weeks before the first day of third grade. My mother is driving me in the blue van to Rey's house. She parks the van in the Salazar's rocky driveway, which leads up to their small, two-story home. I see Rey's mother open their front door, which does not have any windows on it. Mrs. Salazar seems very excited as she smiles and waves ecstatically at the door. Rey squeezes between her mother and the door and runs outside, over the grass, and onto the driveway to greet me. She bounces up and down, smiling the whole way.*

*Once Rey meets me, we both run into her house; our mothers continue talking in the driveway. Rey shows me around her home, which looks much smaller on the inside. She tells me that she has a neighbor upstairs and that her parents only rent out the first floor. It's odd to think that a stranger lives in their upstairs.*

*I remember that Rey wrote in a pen-pal letter to me saying that she shares a bedroom with her parents. I couldn't imagine doing that. My siblings and I all have our own bedrooms and my parents' bedroom is all the way down the hall. I know Rey is an only child, but I can't believe she doesn't have her own room! I keep my thoughts to myself as I know it would be rude to show my shock. My mother has already yelled at me for being rude like this before.*

*Rey and I walk back over to the kitchen and I see Mrs. Salazar wave my mother goodbye as she makes her way into the house. As usual, Mrs. Salazar is smiling and she speaks as though she is always on the brink of bursting into laughter. Her tone sounds like she is singing a song; each syllable rises and falls in pitch.*

*"Kelly! I'm so glad your mom was able to bring you!" She puts weight on each individual word and her accent makes it a little difficult for me to hear.*

*The next few hours of our playdate consist of us watching "The Little Rascals" on their television set in the corner of their living room. Rey and I sit on the cotton couch with dainty foldable tray tables in front of us. The tables are almost as high as my shoulders. Mrs. Salazar brings our lunch over on plastic trays, similar to the ones we use in the school cafeteria. She serves us Kraft mac n' cheese with a side of peas and rice.*

*"Does your mom cook you Filipino food, Kelly?," Mrs. Salazar asks me curiously as she hands us napkins. I shake my head no.*

*As we watch the movie, I realize Rey has already seen it many times before. She tells me that we have to see this one because it's rated PG. But, I've already seen PG-13 movies and I'm only eight, I think in my head. The little kids in the movie must be about five years old; this movie must be for babies. Yet, as it goes on, I quickly realize that "The Little Rascals" is absolutely hilarious. Just ten minutes into it, Rey and I are laughing so hard that our stomachs hurt and our mac n' cheese has barely been touched. By the end of the movie we want to watch it all over again. Yet, Mrs. Salazar tells me that my mother is in the driveway ready to pick me up. I know that Rey's mother does not have her driver's license, which I also find pretty strange. But, I pack my things and say goodbye to Rey and her mother. I leave, smiling.*

While I did not realize it at the time, becoming friends with Rey played an important role in how I began to understand myself as a mixed race individual. With the encouragement of my mother, I was able to find someone who was like me: a girl of Filipino descent amongst a sea of whiteness. I knew that my mother, Rey, her parents, and I shared a connection, one that is rooted in a place far away from Litchfield. At the same time, however, Rey seemed different from me; her mother seemed different from my mother. Perhaps my eight-year-old self was not used to the modest lifestyle of the Salazars. My upbringing in a large house with a spacious backyard and private pond undoubtedly skewed my assumption that all of my classmates live in homes like mine.

According to research on mixed race identity development, (Daniel, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2001; Yancey, 2003), it is not uncommon that being of a higher social class makes one less likely to relate to the minority status or identify with the "lower status" racial identity (as cited in Brunnsma, 2005). Perhaps my new friendship with Rey deepened my comfort level not only with other people of Filipino descent, but also with people who might be of a lower

social class. It was true that I felt connected to Rey, yet simultaneously distant from her. Her family was like mine, but a more exaggerated, more Filipino version. After all, Rey was 100% Filipino and I was only 50%. Rey had two parents from the Philippines and I only had one. This friendship allowed me to find a point of comparison, a way to place myself on the messy spectrum of race.

This point in my life – third grade – seemed to be a time of navigating through what I was in relation to others. Aligning with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), I used group-based identity to understand myself through my friendship with Rey even if that meant I lacked a clear sense of self at the time. With the help of my mother introducing me to Rey, I found myself somewhere in the middle of her and my classmates. I saw myself as more unique than my peers, but less unique than Rey.

As I began to carve a vague outline of my mixed race self, my classmates and others were still perplexed by the way I looked. Their curiosity, and sometimes misperceptions, about my background pushed me further to reflect on who I was. About two years after my experience of being asked whether I was adopted, and a few months after befriending Rey, I was asked yet another provocative question about my identity:

*I sit cross-legged on the carpeted floor with my hands behind my back to support myself. The rest of my third grade class sits in front of me, and we are all listening to Mrs. Mulligan read the picture book for story time. It begins with two boys who are best friends. The picture shows that one of the boys is black, the other white. They play sports together and hang out together. Then, one day, one of the boys' parents does not allow him to see his friend any longer, and though the boy does not understand why, he obeys his parents. They were not even allowed to drink from the same water fountain.*

*As Mrs. Mulligan reads the words aloud and flips through the pages, I look over at Melissa Barker, a girl with frizzy brown hair who is about twice my size. Melissa twists her torso to face me, places her hands in front of her on the carpet, and begins to crawl over in my direction. Her head is low to the ground, almost at my crossed knees. She looks up and loudly whispers, “Kelly.” Her eyes scan me with curiosity. “Are you black?”*

*What a stupid question – I say in my head – of course I’m not black! How does she not know this by now? I shake my head at Melissa and I tell her that I am not. Melissa nods her head and sluggishly crawls over to Rey, who is sitting a few people over to my right. I listen carefully, knowing she is going to ask Rey the exact same question.*

*“Rey, are you black?,” Melissa attempts to whisper quietly.*

*“What?!,” Rey, being her spastic self, yells out loud. “No! I’m not black!”*

*When reading time is over, we sit back at our desks with our brightly colored name tags. I overhear Rey talking about moving from the Philippines to Litchfield when she was four years old. A few of our classmates circle around her listening to her story, which she humbly explains. One of my classmates asks if I was also born in the Philippines.*

*“Yeah I was,” I lie with a smile. “I moved when I was really young so I don’t really remember it.”*

*My classmates inch forward towards me, letting out various “oohs” and “ahhs.” I imagine the hot, humid island that I grew up on with my family; I almost begin to believe it myself.*

Looking back at this experience, I can see how my identity had changed within those last two years. Before, in my first grade classroom, I was baffled at the question of whether I was adopted. At that age, six years old, I could not see from another’s perspective. But, something

shifted by the time I reached third grade. I knew exactly why Melissa asked Rey and me if we were black. Of course, I thought it was a stupid question, but I could at least understand her logic: we were darker than everybody else. We were different.

What intrigues me most about this experience was my decision to lie about where I was born. Was this a quick decision my eight-year-old self made because I was envious of the attention Rey was receiving? Or, was there something deeper clinging to my lie, something signaling that I wanted to be more unique than I was?

This concept of the unique self seems to also be apparent for Ariana, a college senior who identifies as Hispanic, but not as a minority, as her father is from Spain. Ariana felt the desire to be unique and differentiate herself in comparison to her peers when she was younger. She said, “I technically am also Portuguese, but I don’t really identify with that. I think it was because everyone in my area was Portuguese and I was like no no no I’m not Portuguese, I’m Spanish.” She told me a story of her love for her heritage, which started at a young age:

When I was little...I romanticized the idea about everything in Spain. [In kindergarten] the parents would send the children [wearing] whatever their heritage was for Children of the World. My dad had my *Abuela* send me a *flamenco* dress from Spain, and it was this blue and white *flamenco* dress with the shoes and the little hair piece and I remember thinking I was the coolest person at Children of the World that day. I remember looking up in front of everyone and just flaunting it. That was a very memorable moment for me. I was just like “oh look at me. I’m a little Spanish girl.”

Ariana and I were interested in engaging with our background through our appearance. Both of us embodied a similar desire to express our unique selves, especially in comparison to our peers. I continued to build up ways to state my identity. I began to notice the sheer quantity of people who would make a comment about my ambiguous racial appearance. It transitioned from children my age asking blunt questions about my race to adults kindly commenting on my unique features. Around this time, my parents told me I was 50% Filipino, 25% Irish, and 25%

Italian (*Note: I later realized that I am much more Irish than Italian*). I had concrete numbers to answer the common question of “what are you?” I felt prepared for responding to people’s curiosities, confirming my mixed race identity for others.

In the midst of all the questions and comments about my identity, my mother gave me a piece of knowledge that would further help me understand myself. She gave me an explanation that was rather scientific for a nine-year-old, but it allowed me to see why I look the way I do:

*I slide my fingertips in a side-to-side motion on my glossy wooden kitchen table, only to be broken up by the more-than-occasional crumb. The light from the midday sun enters through the large windows in my kitchen, casting a detailed shadow through the doily curtains. My older brother Brandon juggles a soccer ball in the space between the table and the wine rack.*

*My mother pokes my arm with her fingertip, saying, “here, here, and here!” with each word, she lightly taps my arm, “is your melanin!” I giggle as I’m easily tickled. She explains to me that melanin is the pigment, or color, of our skin. She says that everybody has melanin, although I have more because I’m darker. My mother goes on to explain that there are other people who have even more melanin than me, as well as others who have less.*

Learning about melanin gave me something I knew I had that others did not. I had something within my skin that others did not have. At some point soon after this experience, I had another encounter with this “melanin”:

*I rest my back against the beige, velvety seat of my friend Laura’s father’s car. The fibers of the cushion tickle my neck; my head barely reaches the headrest. Laura, to my left, sits behind her father who is driving us to the tennis courts at our school. The summer sun finds its way into the car from my side, reflecting the scarce blonde pieces within Laura’s light brown hair. It’s the summer after fourth grade.*



*Laura's father turns his head over his right shoulder, "Laura sweetie, did you pack your sunscreen?"*

*"Yes, dad," she chirps with a slight roll in her eye.*

*Mr. Torno turns his head in my direction. "Now, Kelly, I bet you don't need as much sunscreen as Laura because you have a bit more of what is called melanin in your skin. People with tanner skin are usually more protected from the sun." I listen politely, but I laugh to myself because I already know what melanin is.*

It seems as though I was finding more and more ways to describe myself to others. Understanding myself through social comparison helped me grasp onto the unique numbers, the percentages, and the big word "melanin" that seemed to only apply to me. Having the words in my vocabulary to classify myself might have encouraged my desire to feel unique (Strauss, 1959). I began to create what I thought to be a clearer sense of identity. Gradually, my mother handed me the words and knowledge that allowed me to begin to see myself more distinctly. I found meaning in the ideas that applied to me and not to others. I slowly was able to catch the outline of my being, peeling away the sheet of whiteness that previously enveloped any sense of self I had.

### *A Liminal Self*

Though I was once proud about this unique part of me that colored my skin, I began to experience moments when I would feel on the border or threshold between my white peers and my mother's side of the family. My racial identity seemed to develop rather unsteadily as I was being pulled in two very different directions, one more strongly than the other. I became entrenched in the upper-middle class culture of my small, white New England town. The white part of my surroundings seemed to shape most of my identity; it was the fabric of my being. The

Filipino part, however, seemed to influence the details of my life, the stitching that was apparent in only some places.

My father and all of his side of the family grew up in and around Connecticut, living similar, privileged lifestyles. This very “white” culture drove me towards particular tendencies, which were only broken up by the occasional trips to my mother’s family in New Jersey or the few stories that she would share about her life in the Philippines. My mother never seemed to intentionally instill her culture into my siblings and me; she never taught us Tagalog and never cooked us Filipino food. While my siblings and I were brought up in a very white, American culture, our Filipino features were what dominated our appearance. Because of this, I felt disconnected between how I saw myself and how I appeared to others; this tension may have been the underpinning to my liminal self.

Cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner (1969) coined the word liminality to describe “liminal entities as neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Applying this concept to mixed race identity, a liminal self would be when I feel out of place or that I don’t fully belong to either racial half. My liminal self in terms of my appearance is the experience of feeling on the outside edge of two groups, away from the white friends I normally surround myself with and even farther away from minorities, even if they look like me.

For a part of my life, particularly during middle school and early high school, the melanin in my skin wore an unsettling mask, which I desperately tried to hide. Yet, its tainted colors seeped through to the surface. My melanin used to be that unique trait which connected me to only certain people, like my mother, my siblings, Rey. Later in middle school, however, my melanin became a site of embarrassment, an odd characteristic pointing out how I was not like

everyone else around me, how I was somehow disconnected from those closest to me. As my middle school-self attempted to cover up the melanin that painted my body, the dominating source of my pigment seemed to take over. I succumbed to the laughs of friends when jokes became too real or too personal.

*“Asian,” “Dumb Asian,” “You’re pretty for an Asian,” “You are so dark, you’re like a different race,” “Rey isn’t pretty because she’s black.”*

Those are the comments that I would hear echo throughout the hallways of my middle and high school. I genuinely believe my public school’s humor was one that derived not from a place of hate or disgust, but from one of ignorance, and even traces of innocence. Still, laughs from the uncultured pushed me into uncomfortable places, leaving me with the easier path of laughing it off. No one could see that my returning smiles after hearing these crude jokes actually stole some of the confidence I had. I barely saw it either. I did not know that with each laugh I let out a part of me was given to my friends. My consent to these jokes invited in the stereotypes of my racial background, which included my mother. Even my older brother, who would never admit it, stood in the center of attention at our school in both the best ways and the worst. Though he was very popular amongst his peers, I overheard comments of ridicule from his friends and racist slurs from others. He was called the “N-word” in elementary school. In high school, a classmate tried to punch him, presumably because he was different.

For me, the constant teasing that I received from close friends - though light-hearted and admittedly comical in some situations - affected me. Absorbing these comments and allowing others’ perceptions of me to paint my own identity falls under Charles Cooley’s (1902) concept of the “looking-glass self.” He suggests that we form our identity based on the reactions and interactions we have with others and how we believe others perceive us. Cooley discusses how

we first “imagine our appearance from the other person” (Cooley, 1902, p. 189; cited in Ryan, 2010). Then, we imagine “his judgment of that appearance” (p. 189). Finally, we assume those judgments to hold truth and we either experience “some sort of feeling such as pride or mortification” (p. 189). For me, it was not pride. So, I tried to change my identity, or at least the way others saw me. I tried to cover up the very trait that gave me my unique self. I tried to hide my melanin.

*I spot a small speedboat in the distance pulling kids in a blow-up tube. The boat skims the topmost layer of the lake water, creating a small ripple of waves that eventually make its way toward the wooden dock I am lounging on. The sun’s white reflection seems to jump off of the tiny waves as they lift and fall with a gentle ease. I slowly lay down on my back and my warm skin from the sun sticks to the rubber lounge chair. I have to close my eyes because the sun’s reflection on the lake water is too strong. I breathe in a warm air that smells of freshly cut grass and of the musty, earthy aroma of Bantam Lake.*

*Behind my closed eyes, I can imagine the sun’s yellow light seeping into my skin. After taking a deep breath and tightening my muscles, allowing myself to sit up, I fumble through my tote bag to find my sun tan lotion. I spot my three friends Hayley, Mary, and Sarah lying on their stomachs and backs with their eyes closed. I remember what my friends told me earlier that day: “You get so dark Kelly. You look like another race in the summer.”*

*I take the bottle, squeeze out the white cream, and apply it to my exposed skin. I make sure not to miss any spots, especially on my face.*

*“Can I have that after you, Kel?,” Mary asks as she turns onto her back. “Also, why do you even bother with sunscreen? Do you even know how dark you are?”*

As I look back on this experience, I am shocked that I hardly remember how these words hurt me. When I would think back to my days in middle school and high school, I picture my loving, genuine friendships. It is only in the process of looking back at my experiences and reflecting upon journal entries that I remember just how much these seemingly harmless comments impacted me (Freeman, 2009). Perhaps it was not the individual instances of these jokes that bothered me, but the accumulation of them, the constant weight they would hold on my identity. I decided to change my appearance, to cover up a part of myself, which represented my background, my mother, and half of me. I would not even admit to my friends the deeper truth as to why I would bother with sunscreen. Instead, I would respond with “oh, I hate having tan lines.” Though I rarely associate my friends with their immature words, I can remember admitting my annoyance or anger within the pages of my journal entries, a piece of evidence showcasing my deeper reactions, which I seemed to have buried underneath years of other positive memories. In a 2014 journal entry, during my senior year of high school, I wrote:

I feel like my friends are naive and they don't open up to new things. They don't understand that there are people with other cultures out there, not just them. They can be ignorant and I just don't understand what is so funny about reminding me that I'm Asian all the time. And honestly, I usually don't care when they make Asian jokes, but it's just whenever I say something considered to be stupid that they'll really freak out.

The annoyance I must have felt towards my friends was linked to my overwhelming sense of not being smart enough to fit the stereotypes. Although my friends did not mean to be cruel by their comments on my background, part of me took my differences as a fault of my being. I mistakenly believed that my deviation from the norm painted me as something inferior, something less than my friends (Berger, 2008). Had I grown up in a neighborhood where the norm was people of darker complexions, perhaps these comments would not have even existed. Perhaps the melanin of others played as important of a role in my racial identity as my own.

As I reflect upon how my relationship with my appearance has shaped my identity, I have come to understand a general motion of my development up until around high school. I seem to have begun my childhood from the perspective of an unaware self, a time when I did not notice that I looked different from others. From there, my newfound discovery of my melanin and my relational understanding with Rey allowed me to transform my perspective into a unique self. This would be when I would exaggerate my special traits and feel proud when speaking about my unique background. However, when the middle school stages of insecurity overwhelmed my vulnerable identity, I seemed to have taken steps backward, toward a stage of liminality.

Similarly, Scott identified a rare situation when he suddenly felt out of place amongst his white friend group. He spoke about attending an Irish club in Connecticut with one of his friends:

It was the first time in [a while when] I walked in and I was like I stick out. Even the lady who was checking us in looked up and did a double take when she saw me. I don't think they ever have black people there. That's the first time in a long time I felt that way. It's usually something where I'm sitting in a restaurant and I'll look up and it'll hit me.

Even though Scott normally connects with and feels comfortable with his white friends, he describes this momentary feeling of liminality, of being on the threshold even with his closest peers. Perhaps this feeling was prompted by the lady staring at him for just a second too long. In a moment, Scott saw himself from the lady's perspective behind the desk, realizing that his darker skin and black curly hair marked a difference between him and everybody else.

Lily heard a few comments that unsettled her. She explained, "in high school, my best friend was half-Vietnamese. So people would call us 'The Asians.' It was never a negative thing. I don't know if I identified with that. It's a known thing [being Asian] but do I really own that identity? That's a different question." Lily and I talked about how we feel more connected to the word "Filipino" than the term "Asian." Although Asian is a category that encompasses Filipino,

some people, nations, museums even, don't consider Filipinos as fully Asian, especially because of the mixed roots it has with Spanish descent. Lily seemed to have experienced a sense of liminality, as being called Asian did not fit with her own perception of herself; yet, she also stated that she did not feel white. Although she identified herself as half-Filipino, there were times when she did not feel that way either, leaving her identity in a liminal space.

Lily's yearly visits to the Philippines seemed to remind her that this place and these people were only a part of her. "When I went to the Philippines," she explained, "I didn't feel half-Filipino, or full; I felt zero-Filipino. People were always staring at [my sister and me]. That was always a big thing; we would get mad... I think my sister was better; I was always so jealous because she has darker skin. They called her *mestiza*, meaning *mixed*. But for me, they would be like 'oh you look completely American' and that would make me so mad." Throughout the interview, Lily spoke about how her lighter complexion did not reflect her half-Filipino identity, especially when comparing it to her sister. She told me that she wanted people to know she is half-Filipino. "It may be because I don't really look it from the outside," she explained. "I really wish people knew that about me."

Lily admitted that her desire to become more accepted into the Filipino community was heightened by her white appearance. Her lighter features may have set initial boundaries, blocking others from seeing how she truly saw herself. She said, "I feel like nobody embraced it. I was like wow, I have nothing in common with these people [in the Philippines]. They don't see it. That was always a hard thing." Lily's liminal self is manifested in her struggle of not feeling like she visually belonged to either side of her racial background.

Being categorized as something different based on our appearance ultimately led us to feel on the outside of our normal social group. Interestingly, the unique self and the liminal self

seem to contrast each other. When we were younger, we strived to be different, unique; yet, during middle school and high school, when others began to note our differences - whether intentionally or not - we internalized it into feeling separated from our peers.

Another part of my liminal self was not just suddenly remembering that my appearance stuck out amongst my white friends, it also included me realizing that I blended in with my mother's family and other minorities. Rather than feeling immediately "at home" with a group of Filipinos or racial minorities, my first instinct was to feel out of place. It was only when I paused and thought about myself from another's perspective that I would remember I actually blended in. I remember a vivid time in middle school when I visited my mother's side of the family for Valerie's baptism. Valerie is my mother's half-sister who is about five years younger than me.

*I sit uncomfortably in my dress in between my brother and sister on the hardwood pews of my Lolo's church. As I look around, the yellow light that shines through the stained glass windows and onto the walls reflects throughout the open space of the church. I see a dozen or so families who are also baptizing their babies. I didn't know that multiple babies are baptized at once. I guess I don't remember my own, I think to myself. Yet, as I look back around, I notice something strange. Every single family here must be Filipino. I can tell that they are. They have similar noses and eyes to my mother's family.*

*Once the baptism is finally over, I walk toward the large entrance doors with my older siblings. I whisper to my brother as we step outside and down the stairs. "Isn't it so weird how everyone looks like us? Like, when we're home, I don't even notice that other people are white." My brother nods his head in agreement. "Yeah, you're right. It's like...backwards."*



This conversation with my brother was the first time I noticed that my immediate perception of myself did not align with how I appeared to others. For a moment, I forgot that I blended in. It was almost as if my unaware self was still lurking inside me.

Even with my sparse moments of feeling betwixt and between, I gravitated towards white friends. However, that did not mean that minorities did not gravitate towards me. Just as the lighter complexion of my social networks gave me a sense of comfort, I may have given racial minorities a comforting sense too. Though I may not have formed my own identity surrounding my partial minority background, my darker features may have suggested otherwise to other people. It is possible that some minorities, particularly Hispanic and Asian minorities - as I believe I look racially ambiguous between the two - saw me through a comfortable lens. Some could have an in-group bias (Hewstone, 1990) of me. They might assume that my similar, darker features signified that I held similar values and opinions as them, leading them to think more positively of me. Once I began to understand the power of my racially ambiguous features, I started taking more notice of the relationships I could build with different people. In high school, I started volunteering at a hospital in a neighboring town. The color of the people surrounding me expanded and diversified with each weekly visit:

*I pull the pink and white vertical striped smock over my head. It lays stiff against my torso, hanging over the tops of my legs, crinkling with each step I take over the pale, dusty tiles of Charlotte Hungerford's emergency room. I quicken my pace as I pass a man with a long, unruly beard, ripped clothing, and a thick stench of alcohol. He is slumped over on the hospital bed in the hallway, yelling profanities at one of the nurses.*

*It's only my third day volunteering as a patient representative, a candy striper, a girl from Litchfield - the other side of town. About twenty minutes earlier, my mother had driven me*

*from my house in our new Toyota Camry across the town line into Torrington. I always think of Torrington as the small city adjacent to Litchfield, whose parks and walls are painted with graffiti and whose people wear torn, baggy clothing. The hospital sits on one of the sloping hills connecting to where my father used to have his own physician's office. Both of my parents used to work in this hospital. It is also where I was born. Fifteen years later, I am back, walking amongst the white hallways where my parents gave medical advice to others, where they delivered babies, and where my mother gave birth to me. This was the space in which I came to life.*

*As I continue to walk around the hallways, I see a woman lying down in a hospital bed. She lays there comfortably still with her dark hands clasped together over her stomach, resting on top of the cream-colored cotton blanket. A young girl around my age with long black hair stands beside her.*

*“Hi,” I calmly introduce myself in a small, high-pitched croak. “My name is Kelly and I’m a patient representative.” As I am about to explain what I can offer them, which is simply coffee, snacks, or books, I realize that the mother is staring through me with a blank face. Almost immediately, the girl standing beside me begins to speak in Spanish, translating my words for her mother.*

*Though I have taken Spanish since the fifth grade, I never paid any particular attention. I was always too busy sitting in the back of the classroom talking with my friends. This may be the first time I have encountered someone translating my words for me, at least someone around my age. I begin to stutter.*

*“I’m sorry, um, I wanted to see if uh your mom needed anything.” I speak to the girl and then turn to the mother, unsure of who I should be looking at. As the girl translates my words*

*and her mother mumbles something back in Spanish, I am surprised that the girl begins to speak to me in formal English. She barely has an accent. Suddenly, my surprise transforms into a state of awe. She can think and speak in two different languages with such fluidity and ease. She can connect people who would never be able to communicate without her. I think to myself about how impressed and even envious I am of her ability.*

*“I have a question.” She begins to speak to me as herself, and not as her mother. “How did you start doing this?”*

*“You mean how did I become a volunteer?,” I gently ask her to clarify and she nods her head.*

*I begin to explain how I filled out an application and interviewed with my current boss. I tell her that part of my motivation was to see if I wanted to work in medicine. I tell her that I only volunteer on the weekends because of school and practice, bringing me to ask her: “so what school do you go to?” I recognize that she is around my age and that she most likely goes to Torrington High School. Once I let these words roll off of my tongue, the girl hunches her shoulders, steers her eyes away from mine, and gradually shakes her head. She stutters in her response. I wonder if I need to clarify what I had said.*

*Yet, she responds with a tone of shame, “I um, don’t really go to school.” Her words swallow away in a whisper. The girl speaks slowly and turns her head to face her mother who is still lying on her back, looking up at the ceiling, unaware of the content of our conversation. My eyes widen at this response. How could someone my age not be in school? Isn’t that illegal?*

*To me, it does not seem as though she is “playing hooky.” It seems as if there is something in the way preventing her from doing what she wants and what she needs. Though I may not be the perfect student, I know how important an education is, and I begin to tell her this*

*with gentle words. I tell her about the school in her town; I describe how the couple of friends I know who go there love the school. It may be a bit of a white lie, but I begin to see this girl's eyes start to meet mine again.*

*She asks me, "I'm also looking for a job around here. Would you know of any places that are hiring?" I smile, knowing that while I may not be able to fully convince her to attend school, I could create a list of places that might be hiring. I tell her that I will be right back and I run to find a piece of paper and a pen. I do not want her to leave without me trying to help her, so I move quickly. I come back with a pen and paper and begin writing up against the white painted concrete wall a list of restaurants and shops that I think might be hiring. I turn to her, "you know, since you're bilingual, you'll have a much bigger chance of getting hired." Her eyes widen in surprise.*

*"Really?," she asks with a smile.*

*"Yes, employers love that! I'm so jealous you can speak two languages." I tell her the truth. Though I hardly pay attention in Spanish class, I truly am envious of her ability to connect with so many people. I can't believe she doesn't realize how powerful being bilingual is.*

As I walked away from the girl that day, I felt a rising sense of connection. Though I could not describe it in the moment, I knew that something had changed within me. I knew part of my excitement stemmed from feeling proud about helping another individual. Yet, I have helped many people in the past and this one felt special. Maybe it felt special because I felt a connection with this girl who seemed so different from me. She looked nothing like the peers I was used to, and yet I was pleasantly surprised at how that did not stop me from connecting with her.

About a year later, I was in the process of choosing what to write for my college essay. After going through story after story, memory after memory, of what to write about, I suddenly knew. I wanted to write about the time I spoke to the bilingual girl in the hospital. Once I had my topic in mind, I realized that I had to fit it with a question from the Common App website. I realized I could have written about my experience in a way that aligned with any of the question options; yet, I chose to answer the question on identity:

Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story". (Common App, 2013)

After multiple drafts, I wrote my two-paged paper, describing the story of how I viewed my conversation with this girl at the time of the experience. I hoped it would reveal an accepting and curious aspect of my identity to the admissions counselors. After showing my writing to my father, I distinctly remember him telling me:

*"Oh, and I'm sure you can add how you related to her as a minority as well." My father nods his head in agreement with himself. He gives me this advice so casually, as if he assumes I had already thought of this in my head and I simply forgot to add it to my essay. But, I didn't think of it. I stare at my father for almost a second too long, and a rush of realization comes to me. "Ohh yeahhh," I trail off. I shake my head laughing to myself, forgetting for a second - or maybe more - that I too am a minority. I hardly ever call myself that. I keep it to myself that my father's idea never even crossed my mind. How stupid of me, I think.*

*"Of course," my father continues, "your situation is pretty different than most minorities, but I think it would help the story connect a bit more to yourself." Right, I think; I'm a very lucky minority. With my father's advice, I add one more paragraph to my essay. As the words are*

*pressed from my fingertips, to the iPad screen, to a printed piece of paper, I feel more and more like a liar, or a phony. But, I know it will create a better story, and so I write this:*

I believe she is like many other people, including myself, who are struggling to overcome the boundaries that society sets. I saw myself in her because, as a minority, I understand the difficulties in being different than others.

After my father reminded me of my minority status, the story of my friends teasing me when I applied sunscreen onto my skin came back to mind. While my friend Mary probed me with the sarcastic question, “Do you even know how *dark* you are?” I realized that, in some ways, her question made sense. In the brief moments leading up to the clarity of remembering who I was, my natural instinct was to see myself as I did in Mrs. Leifert’s first grade classroom, completely unaware that I did not blend in with my white classmates.

At the same time, although I look back at this experience with a slight sense of disappointment that I did not immediately recognize my minority identity, I realize that a part of me was writing my essay from some source of truth. Though I believed I was a “liar” or a “phony” for claiming that I saw myself in her, I wonder now whether that was partially true. I may not have remembered to call myself a minority in the moment of the experience or in the process of writing, but I do remember feeling some type of change within me at that time. Maybe I did not see myself in her then as much as I do now, but I wonder if she saw herself in me, and maybe that was enough to create a connection.

I could not pinpoint what it was, but now I believe that my feeling of change was an experience of freedom. Perhaps a part of me felt free to have met someone my age that was like me in some ways: dark hair and dark skin, possibly with an immigrant mother. Even though she was unlike me in other ways, such as the fact that she could fluently speak two languages, it was calming to know that I could still relate to her on some level. I felt free from my white peers,

knowing that their comments of ridicule could not touch me as I began to meet new people who saw me as someone like them. It opened up an array of possibilities that were free for me to explore, and not my friends.

Out of all of the interviewees, Scott and I were the only ones who had darker features. Our darker skin was an instant signifier of our difference; the first thing people saw in us was what made us different. Scott spoke about how he was easily able to move throughout different racial friend groups in middle school. Yet, in high school, he noted that this fluidity became more difficult:

I've noticed that [my black friends and white friends] don't mix that well. My best friend in high school was actually white, so when we were in high school hanging together I'm sure there were times when a group of black students would talk to me and it'd be kind of awkward for him because he didn't know them as well.

Scott seemed aware of this aura of connection he held; he knew that some minorities felt connected to him simply because of the color of his skin. Yet, he also noticed that the black students' connection with him could not move through him and be passed onto his white friend. Likewise, his white friend was not able to connect with or even continue talking when Scott's black friends were around. Scott seemed to almost stand as a wall in between race, rather than a bridge. He was in a liminal stage; he was the color in between the lines of race.

Starting from a memory of my six-year-old self to stories of when I was 17 years old, this chapter explores my unaware, unique, and liminal selves as I developed identity through my appearance. Prior to forming any mixed race identity, I had to have my differences become revealed to me. There was a point in my life when I could not see that the shade of my own skin contrasted those around me. I did not know that the hands I shook and the arms I linked with created a crease of color between my friends and me. Soon after my eventual discovery of my

own appearance, I was charged with this desire to embrace what made me different; I wanted to exaggerate these traits that made me unique.

Yet, through this transition of becoming conscious and becoming proud of my racial background, I soon found myself in a space of liminality. I felt out of place with my white side and my minority side. I built a disconnected relationship with my appearance; I saw myself differently than how others saw me. These parts of myself began to contradict one another, leaving me with only a vague sense of my mixed race identity. This aspect of identity through appearance is important; being aware of our body or the way we appear to others is inseparable from the self (May, 1953). Throughout later parts of my adolescence, though, I began to see my mixed race identity as something beyond a mixing of skin tones, hair textures, and facial structures. I saw it as something deeper. I began to understand my identity through the mixing of cultural norms and values, which were instilled in me at different points in my life.



## Chapter 2: Beneath: Identity Through Culture

Beneath my appearance of racial ambiguity lay pieces of cultural symbols and stories that had been passed down from my mother to my siblings and me. Growing up, my connection to Filipino culture was rather subtle. I could only imagine my mother's world through the rare stories she would share about her life back in the Philippines. Looking back now, however, I see that even throughout my very American, New England, "white" way of growing up, I was, in some ways, like my mother. Although she left behind a whole other life in the Philippines, she brought over a sense of calmness, directness, an ability to laugh at herself, and a passion for music and dance. This chapter explores how my unaware, unique, and liminal selves continue playing a role in how I identify myself through my mother's culture.

### *Roots: What She Left*

Similar to how I was once unaware of my mixed race appearance, I grew up primarily unaware of my mother's culture. Up until high school, I hardly ever thought of my mother as an immigrant, as someone who lived a whole other life thousands of miles away from what I call home. I did not consider how much she had to give up or how much she may have had to change in order for me to live the life I did. Most of my mother's cultural roots were left behind, forgotten in her one-story home in Manila. However, during one trip to my mother's father's house - my Lolo's house in New Jersey - I started to understand what exactly my mother had left behind and I began to step out of my culturally unaware self:

*The foggy steam rises from the pot of clear, yellow noodles placed on the dining room table. The dish sits among other plates of Filipino food. My Lolo's wife's sister Lagaya passes around paper plates to all my cousins. She smiles flatly as she watches us serve ourselves the food she has just prepared. With the paper plate in my hand, I eagerly work my way around the*

*table, asking my mother to name each of the dishes. She points to the noodles and calls it pancit, and I scoop some of it onto my plate. I add mechado, which my mother tells me is a Filipino beef stew, as well as a few lumpias, or Filipino egg rolls. I make sure to stay away from the lechon, otherwise known as the giant pig that rests in the center of the table. Its eyes are missing, yet it feels as though he is watching me. As I make my way back to the kitchen table, I grab a warm, buttery, fluffy piece of pandesal. Every year that I visit Lolo's, I look forward to the pandesal bread. I have only had this bread when I come here, about once every two years.*

*My mother sits across from me with her small portion of food. "Mom," I ask, "why don't we ever have this food at home?"*

*My mother hesitates as if she is asking herself this for the first time. "I don't really know how to cook it..." She searches for a better excuse. "And, plus there's no Filipino food stores near us," she replies.*

*I'm not sure if I believe either of these statements. How could she not have once seen her mother or father cook this food growing up? I also know there has to be a way to find these ingredients near Litchfield. At the very least, I want to find a place back home where I can get some pandesal.*

*I sit down at the extended kitchen table next to my older sister Caitlin. One by one, my brother, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, and Lolo and Rowena – my grandfather and his wife – sit down. Rowena mumbles something in Tagalog to Lolo. They sit up from their chairs and switch seats, placing their daughter Vivian in between them. Vivian, who is my half-aunt but is actually only a few years younger than me, has a rare genetic disorder called Prader-Willi Syndrome. She begins to cry and kicks her feet on the ground in protest of the small amount of food on her plate. I see Valerie - Vivian's younger sister - walk over to Vivian. Valerie places her*

*small, delicate hands over Vivian's broad shoulders and gently repeats, "Ate, ate. You like this food. It will be okay."*

"Ate," which is pronounced like "ah-tay," is a respectful way to address an older sister. Valerie uses it for her older sister Vivian; my Aunt Cholette uses it when she addresses my mother. But, I was never told to call my older sister Caitlin "Ate."

*As I watch the closeness of Vivian and Valerie, I realize I sit about a foot or two apart from my own sister, who I can only call "Caitlin." It would have been cool to call my sister "Ate;" but now, it's too late. And, it's too late to pick up Tagalog, isn't it? I look back over at Valerie who is holding her sister's hand to calm her down. I don't think I've ever been that close to my sister either.*

I have never been to the Philippines. It was always on our family's bucket lists. It was always the next vacation. Yet, the 17-hour flight and the high prices seemed to be the perfect reason to never visit. The closest I have come to immersing myself in my mother's culture was through our rare visits to Lolo's house. As a child, this house was always a strange, foreign place to me. Lolo's children from his second marriage were younger than me. Lolo's wife's sister lived with them and she cooked all of their meals. The poor pig sitting as the centerpiece on the dining room table scared me. They used paper plates and served strange food, although most of it I enjoyed. I could not understand Lolo's English. Though I call him *Lolo* in front of my family, I always remembered calling him my grandfather in front of friends.

Even though my mother's Filipino language, food, and family dynamics were not apparent in my own family, visiting Lolo's house helped me imagine what my mother's childhood might have looked like, sounded like, and even smelled like. Being able to see my mother's father raise young girls with a Filipino wife was as if I was brought back in time and

heard the conversations he would have with my mother and her sisters. Stepping into that home felt like stepping into what I could imagine a home in the Philippines might be. It reminded me of how different my life could have been if my mother had clung more closely to her roots.

I felt lucky that I was brought up in a way that I could easily connect to my peers in my small, New England community. I remember wondering if my Lolo's kids from his second marriage would ever fit in; it was as if they were still living back in the Philippines. I remember my mother telling me that she wanted to raise us in the "American way." My siblings and I played soccer, baseball, and lacrosse; we joined the clubs and activities that everyone in my town was a part of. We did not have to attend single-ed Catholic school like my mother. I did not realize this until now, but within my mother's encouragement for my siblings and me to live the New England Childhood, she sacrificed a part of her culture. With the exception of becoming friends with Rey's family, it seems as though my mother struggled to connect with my friends' parents. On the sidelines of soccer games and in the audience of my plays, my mother watched me, cheered for me, in some ways, alone. In her desire for us to fit in, she gave up a part of herself. Lau (2005) discusses how children of immigrants are better able to form cross-racial relationships and tend to take on new values and lifestyles more readily than their immigrant parents (as cited in Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). I believe my mother understood this trend and ultimately encouraged my sense of belonging, even at the expense of losing a part of hers. Little did she know that my siblings and I have all felt a sense of curiosity to know more about her culture. We all wished we were taught Tagalog at a young age. I wished I could have called my sister "Ate."

Ariana and Lily also discussed their desire to fluently speak their parent's native language. Although Ariana learned Spanish to a greater extent than I learned Tagalog, she

admitted that her lack of total fluency discouraged her from feeling like a “full Hispanic.” Even a subtle language barrier was enough to keep her from truly hearing her life from the perspective of a young Hispanic woman. For the sake of her father learning English, Ariana’s family made the choice to leave that cultural aspect behind. Similarly, Lily told me, “I say all the time that I wish I learned [Tagalog]. I wish that was my first language. I’m really mad that [my mother] did that.” All three of us, Ariana, Lily, and I, felt a sense of longing and curiosity for our parents to share special parts of their culture with us. Their culture made our parents unique; our desire to embody that cultural uniqueness continued on.

*Roots: What She Brought*

Some pieces of my mother’s culture were in fact brought over. While they mainly resided in the New Jersey home of my Lolo, some of the quirks of my Filipino mother were passed onto me. My mother encouraged my siblings and me to follow our own interests in the many activities we could be involved in as children. Psychoanalyst Erikson (1959) would call my opportunity to make my own choices as resolving the developing stage of *initiative*. This initiative that my parents - especially my mother - granted me allowed me to learn *industry*, another Eriksonian term describing how my parents supported my intrinsically motivated interests. For instance, I found my love for music, and in particular, the piano and guitar. While this type of art may not be unique to the Philippines, I find that I can relate to my mother through music. The calmness that music gave her and the way it allowed her to laugh at herself found its way to me. The relationship my mother had with music formed an impression on how I saw and heard the world:

*Tucked into the corner of the living room surrounded by large windows on either wall stands a black electronic piano. I hop onto the black piano bench – my six-year-old self barely sinks into the leather cushion. My bare feet dangle in the air above the pedals on the ground. I*

*press the “on” button and begin to glide my fingers across the smooth white keys. Feeling the ease of each key as I gently press down, I realize I can control how loud the music is by the pressure of my hands.*

*As I begin to stroke the keys more softly, I hear my mother’s loud footsteps echo throughout the foyer, making her way into the living room. She walks into the room and sits down next to me on the piano bench. She begins to press her bony knuckles on top of the black narrow keys, which sit in between the wider white ones. Her hand forms into a fist and she rolls her knuckles up the black keys and then back down, creating a simple, beautiful melody. After a few tries, we begin to play the song together, just an octave apart.*

*Then, my mother pulls out a big red book with music written in it from under the piano bench. The book contains children’s music with no staff and no chords—just a few black notes with the letters written in white. Without looking at the book, she teaches me “do, re, mi, fa, so la, ti” on the keys. But, I tell her that my music in front of me reads with letters like “a, b, c, d, e, f, g.” Realizing that she was taught in a different way, she translates it for me, teaching me the same notes, but with my letters. Soon enough, I learn to play “Red Hot Buns” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” I tell her I want to take piano lessons.*

*A few weeks later, I find myself walking with my mother across a parking lot dripping with snow. The floor-to-ceiling windows wrap around three walls of the building, revealing multiple levels of hardwood floors and a wooden ballet bar glued to the glass. From the parking lot, we walk up the steps and into the main lobby. A group of about five very tall, very thin girls flutter by us. They are all wearing leotards and tights and their hair is tied in a tight bun on the back of their heads.*

*As the girls in their pastel leotards skip up the steps and disappear, a large-framed Russian woman walks towards me. She has short dark hair with grey streaks that look like wires peeking out. She introduces herself to me with a name I cannot pronounce. Her deep voice shakes me. My new piano teacher opens up a door to my right and we walk into a large empty room. The room is coated with wooden floors; placed in the middle is a brown Kawasaki piano, a piano bench, and a black plastic chair. I sit down on the piano bench and look up at my teacher. She pulls out a booklet containing an intricate display of written music that I have never seen before. It has a staff, notes piled on top of each other, and various signs and markings that are foreign to me.*

*“Play it,” she tells me directly.*

*I stare wide-eyed at the mess written in front of me.*

*“I’ve never played with a staff before,” I tell her; “I’ve only played where the notes are written on it. That’s how my mom taught me.”*

*My piano teacher stares at me for a few seconds, shakes her head, and mumbles something under her breath. She realizes she needs to teach me how to read music.*

*After a few weeks of learning the piano, I am able to play with a staff and read the music myself. One day after my piano lessons, my mother picks me up in her dark green minivan. As she walks outside to greet me in the parking lot, she asks:*

*“Did you want to also take ballet lessons?”*

*I picture the lanky girls in their leotards running around in the lobby, specifically remembering one girl whose blonde hair was tied so tightly in a bun that it looked as if her eyes were about to bulge out.*

*“No,” I say, shaking my head. “Ballet is stupid. I want to play baseball.” My mother chuckles at my response and tells me that my older sister Caitlin tried ballet and did not like it either.*

While most of my friends took piano lessons in the homes of their piano teachers, I found out that my mother had brought me to a world-renowned ballet conservatory for my piano lessons. Years later, she told me she was once offered the opportunity to become a professional ballet dancer in the Philippines. However, she had to turn it down. Her mother, my Lola, wanted her to stay in school and look after her younger sisters instead. In light of learning more about my mother’s past, I question if she had hoped that I might find interest in her lifelong passion. Did a piece of this place remind her of her after-school ballet classes in the Philippines? Perhaps she wanted me to continue on a passion of hers; perhaps she wanted me to embody what she could have become.

While my mother encouraged my interests, she rarely directed them. After expressing my belief that ballet was stupid, she never tried to convince me otherwise. In fact, she signed me up for baseball that following spring, not realizing that the American sport of baseball was played almost entirely by boys. I ended up being one of three girls in the league and was the only girl on my team, *The Phillies*.

My mother seemed to be handing me the options in my life, opening doors to new pathways, allowing me to choose my direction. This was something that she was never given. She seemed to resent the fact that she had to turn down the opportunity to become a professional dancer. Yet, she also seemed to understand and ultimately accept her duty to watch over her siblings. I know now that my mother raised me differently than the way she was raised.



Though my mother had never forced my love for the piano, her deep appreciation for the arts may have inspired me to embody the extension of her fingers, becoming a part of her through music. I knew that playing music reminded her of her home back in the Philippines. She had made comments about how she wished she could have kept the family piano from the Philippines instead of her sister. “All my music from back home was in that piano bench too. I only have a few pieces left here,” she would say. Looking back now, I realize that I relate to my mother through music, a passion that both she and I share. From the first song she taught me when I used my knuckles on the black keys, to the old yellowed piano sheet music that she brought from the Philippines, all are nestled in my memory. The songs echo throughout my ears as if I could hear fleeting moments of my mother’s life in her small home in Manila.

I have vivid memories of making up piano songs on the spot. Though many would consist of the regular chords in C or G major, a classical, Western sound, I also remember trying to create songs that sounded like something my mother might have heard back home. There was one specific day when I played something that I made up for my mother:

*I delicately place my fingers on the black keys, paying extra attention that they will not slip off and touch a white key. This way, all of my notes would be sharps or flats; they would blend smoothly together in an almost effortless sound. I begin to create music out of nothing and I hold down the pedal so that the waves of melodies and harmonies would circle around the room without stopping. The rich mixture of sounds reminds me of songs we would sing in chorus, one of which is Japanese. I tell my mother that what I am playing sounds like it could be a beautiful Asian song. She smiles and agrees with me.*

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, she narrates her life growing up in California with a mother who was born and raised in China. She talks about music in relation to

her mother's culture and explains that "Chinese piano music is five black keys" (Kingston, 1976). At that time of making up the Asian-style music, I knew I had an ear for hearing songs of different cultures. I wondered if any of my friends would have noticed the difference. I believed I was unique in this way.

When I was seven, my mother brought the family guitar up to the Adirondacks, where we would vacation with my mother's sister and her family every summer. After long days of water tubing, fishing, and hiking, our nights in the Adirondacks were filled with playing the songs my mother had taught me, often alongside her. One night, she taught me a song on the guitar, which I still know by heart today:

*"It's an old Spanish song," my mother tells me. "My teacher taught it to me when I was twelve at my first and only guitar lesson," she laughs.*

*She begins to explain to me that Filipinos derive from Spanish, Chinese, and Malaysian backgrounds.*

*"We are a mix," she tells me. I smile, excited to tell my friends of my newly extended background.*

*My mother shows me how to play this beautiful, melancholy song, whose melody speaks like two voices: one beating steadily from the lowest note on the guitar and another fluttering up and down like gentle waves a few octaves away. My fingers gently touch the cold, wired strings that hover just above the neck of the guitar. My mother presses her fingers firmly over mine, pushing them into the sharp strings. She teaches me when to release my hand and where to move it further down the neck. In the beginning, she strums the pattern for me, using four of her fingers to stroke each string, similar to how she does with the piano. I watch in awe as she plays the song herself. Gradually, I begin to form similar sounds on my own.*

For the next eight years or so, that was the only song I could play on the guitar. Yet, anytime I saw a guitar, I would immediately pick it up, strum the beautifully soft pattern, and show off the unique blending of melodies that I could create. I felt empowered; I felt proud that I could share a unique part of a culture that, in some ways, belonged to me. I even saw my Filipino culture expand as my mother told me the Philippines had roots in other cultures.

As I reflect on the music in my early life, it seems as though the air in the living room of my childhood was constantly filled with the musical notes played by my mother and me. In hindsight, I also wonder: maybe it was not just the music itself that helped me connect with my mother and her culture. Perhaps it was my mother's relationship to that music. The way it calmed her and the way she could laugh at herself was more distinct compared to the people around me, yet more aligned with what I noticed in her family. The old sheets of music that she brought over, along with the tunes in her head, allowed me to hear a part of her world. My connection to my mother's cultural roots were subtly woven into my life through the musical notes that partially composed my identity.

Ariana and Lily, who have both visited their family in Spain and the Philippines respectively, seemed to connect to their roots in a deeper way than I did. Though Ariana noted how her father was unable to teach her fluent Spanish, she knew that one of the many aspects her father did bring over was soccer. She passionately explained:

Soccer was a huge part of my life. This is stereotypical because my dad is from Spain, but I played for him because he was such a huge soccer fan. I used to get soccer cleats [that] are red and yellow, and they look like the Spanish flag. My dad also used to buy us the jerseys so we'd wear them to practice. I knew he loved the game growing up and I think that's why I tried really hard and strove to show that I could do it. Soccer was huge for me. It pretty much took up our lives. I miss it actually.

Ariana spoke proudly of her passion. She saw it as one of the ways she could connect with her father and her Spanish background. Even though her father was a foreigner in the community,

she understood that their shared love for the sport made him feel at home. It also made Ariana feel a part of her father's home back in Spain.

Ariana seemed to have had a stronger process of enculturation than I did. She “encompassed a level of involvement with her culture-of-origin, which was nurtured through early childhood exposure to cultural symbols primarily through family interactions” (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011, p. 15). Her face lit up and her eyes glistened when she told me about her trips visiting her family in Spain. She couldn't help but smile when she thought back to her days playing soccer with her father. These cultural stories gave Ariana a deeper understanding of her own roots, guiding her to form a clearer identity through her father's culture.

On a similar note, Lily discussed that the way her mother brought over Filipino culture was by bringing Lily and her sister back to the Philippines. “For us,” Lily said, “our Filipino identity was always there because we would go [to the Philippines] every summer. We never had to be told ‘oh there's this side of you’ because we were seeing it every year for two months... There was always this understanding; it was so ingrained in our lives.” Lily described how important it was for her and her mother to visit the Philippines. Lily's visits in the summer helped shape her image of Filipino popular culture. She confidently explained to me that “basketball is really popular in the Philippines; both boys and girls played it.” She told me this after saying that she played basketball herself, just like her father and mother. She also said, “I started dancing [hip-hop] when a lot of girls would start doing ballet... my mom is really interested in dance too so that definitely had an influence.”

Ariana, Lily, and I all associate our parent's culture with different activities. I saw soccer as the quintessential New England sport that everyone in my town plays, whereas Ariana viewed soccer as an embodiment of her Spanish identity. Lily clung to hip-hop over ballet, similar to her

mother, whereas I was the other way around. These “cultural activities” may be, in fact, social constructs of what our parents enjoyed and connected with growing up. Our parents brought over an array of interests from their home country, and it was up to us, as mixed race children, to choose whether we clung to these interests or turned in the other direction.

### *Chicago*

The way I understood myself began to change as my surroundings became more colorful and more diverse. The Acculturation Theory, which is how identities change through continuous first-hand interactions with a culturally diverse group of people (Smokowski & Baccallao, 2011) came into play during my trip to Chicago. As I was immersed in new social environments made up of minorities, lower-socioeconomic classes, and foreigners, my skin tone no longer was the trait that could make me unique. Instead, I had to look for something else that made me who I was; I had to look beneath my melanin. One of the experiences I had where I was able to leave the whiteness of my town began to shape the deeper layers of my identity. This new experience, which took place on a student conference trip to Chicago, challenged me to seek my identity more deeply.

During the summer before my senior year, I received a large white envelope with my name on it. Encrusted on the top right corner was an engraved sticker with the words “People to People.” Upon opening up the letter, I learned that my school’s guidance counselor had nominated me to participate in a business leadership conference, which would take place for ten days at the University of Chicago. After an exciting wait, I packed my suitcase filled with professional attire and workout clothes and flew by myself to Chicago for the very first time:

*Floor-to-ceiling glass windows stretch like a taut sheet across both sides of the O’Hare International Airport’s corridors. I take my first steps in Chicago. My black flats rub against the*

*airport's tiled floors and my overly packed suitcase drags behind me. As I was told, I would have a People to People worker greet me as I exit off the plane and bring me to the bus heading toward the University of Chicago. Immediately, I spot a tall, thin man with a maroon polo and khaki pants, just as I was told to wear. He is holding a sign that reads "Kelly."*

*I quickly follow this man who leads me to a group of five other students around my age, all wearing the same matching outfits. They look as though they have been standing in awkward silence the entire time. Cringing at this thought, I immediately smile at the girl standing closest to me. She has long straight black hair, tan skin, and black framed "hipster" glasses. She manages to make the required outfit look flattering; she looks like she could be a model.*

*"Hi! I'm Kelly!" I reach out to shake her hand, smiling.*

*The girl smiles with her straight, white teeth. She gently grasps my hand and mumbles her name in a quiet, low, and accented voice. I do not hear what she says and I kindly ask her to repeat it. She says her name again, and I still cannot decipher any part of what she is saying. My cheeks become warm and flushed. I smile and nod, pretending that I understand her accent well enough to hear her name.*

*"Alright, time to head onto the bus!," the People to People worker shouts out. Quickly, I hurry to the front of the group. I do not want this girl to say something to me that I cannot understand.*

*After the blur of the bus ride, where I met a few other students, we finally arrive at the University of Chicago. From inside the lobby of the dormitory, I spot about fifty students through the glass windows, hanging around in the grass courtyard. Some are playing frisbee and soccer; others are sitting on top of the picnic tables chatting. I quickly drop off my suitcase in my bedroom so that I can run back down to meet all of these people.*

*Only a few minutes after I walk into the courtyard, we are told to find our teacher leaders and our student groups. I look down at my name tag, which reads that I am in “Debra’s” group. Looking around the courtyard as groups start to form, I spot a short-statured woman with a blonde bob-cut, holding a sign with her name on it.*

*“Hi there, I’m Debra, but you can call me Deb.” Deb speaks with a warm, Southern accent. I see two other people in my group so far who introduce themselves as Aditya, a short, heavy-set boy with thick black glasses, and Mayank, who stands tall and thin. They are both from India and they stand together quietly. I do not introduce myself to them. Instead, I wait for a few more students to join my group, quickly analyzing each person, hoping for a normal set of peers. The next student to walk over has blonde, poofy hair and tan skin. She introduces herself as “Stephanie,” emphasizing the “Steph” part of her name. She smiles and politely tells Deb that she is from Miami, which sounds like “My-yah-me” to me.*

*I look at Stephanie’s name tag and realize that she is my direct roommate in the dorm. Smiling, I explain to her that she is my roommate. I feel a huge sigh of relief. My roommate is normal! The next two girls to walk over are both as tan as me and have silky black hair. They enter the middle of our group laughing, arm-and-arm together; they must be friends from home. Still giggling, they introduce themselves as Sydney and Valeria, both are from Honduras. They wave at everyone in our group, and I cannot help but smile.*

*I notice that a small, frail girl has snuck into the circle without me realizing. She introduces herself quietly as Nina. She has medium-length dark hair and a prominent nose; her features remind me of a bird. After introducing herself, she clasps her hands together behind her, twirling her foot into the grass, and looks down. Finally, the last two boys head towards our group. Sergio, who is from Spain but lives in Michigan, walks over. Lastly, Justin, who is half-*

*Indian and lives in California, comes running into the group and high fives every one of us. He is wearing a blue sweat band across his forehead and is a little too enthusiastic about this entire program.*

*After only a few moments of looking around at everyone, I already feel myself gravitate towards Stephanie, Valeria, and Sydney. Their bubbly personalities and friendly presence remind me of my friends from back home. As I begin to relax, knowing that the people in my group seem like people I would get along with, a realization falls into my thoughts. Everyone here can speak two languages and almost everyone has lived in another country. I think back to the letter explaining that I was nominated by my school's guidance counselor to participate on this trip. Of course, I think in my head, laughing. Of course, none of my friends were offered the opportunity to come here. I'm not anything special. I'm just one of the few minorities at my school. I was the most interesting person my guidance counselor could think of. But in Chicago? I'm part of the majority for one of the first times in my life. My long black hair and tan skin blend in amongst my new group.*

*After a whole night of learning about everyone's backgrounds and stories, we are brought together the following morning for a trip just outside of Chicago. I'm sitting at the back of the coach bus next to Sydney. My entire group sits together along with another group who we have become close to. Everyone leans their heads into the aisle of the bus, holding onto the seats for support, allowing us to hear one another. Many of the conversations are traced with curious questions about people's backgrounds and native languages. I hear my group members speak Spanish, Hindi, Sinhala, Afrikaans, Albanian, and Korean. I have never heard of some of these languages before, yet immediately, some of my new peers begin to teach me and the others different words in their languages. While about half of the students in my group grew up in*



*another country and the other half grew up in the U.S. with immigrant parents, they all seem to have learned a second language as a child. I wish I could contribute by teaching these people Tagalog. I only know how to count to ten, how to introduce myself, and of course, a few swear words I learned from my mother. But, it feels as though it is too late to actually become fluent in this language. Why did my mother not teach me the language she grew up with? As I listen to the fluidity of these people, moving from one language to another, I am in awe, and a bit envious. As the mini language lessons transform into deeper and more funny memories, story after story becomes shared, bringing out unruly laughs that echo throughout the bus. Though each of us comes from such different places, our stories from back home about our friends and family seem to resonate deeply with everyone.*

*Whether we are sharing times from our high school dances, our excitement for applying for college, or explaining details of our “crazy” times with friends, we so desperately want to hear what everyone has to say. At one point during the bus ride, right after Sergio tells us a funny story, I politely announce that his story reminds me of a similar one of mine. As soon as I shout this out, every single person in my group turns their heads toward me, smiling in anticipation for my own words. This intense attention that I am rarely given catches me so off guard that I am disrupted, and for a moment, I forget what I am about to say. This group of friends who I met less than 24 hours ago seems to pause in time, as if the bus had stopped in mid motion. Through a moment of clarity, I seek out the detailed outlines of their smiles and wide-eyed expressions. The stopping of time allows me to pause and try to re-gather my thoughts.*

Though I do not recall the exact story I shared, the moment leading up to it, when everyone was so curious about my own life, stuck with me. It seems so rare to have a completely blank slate when telling our life stories, when sharing our identity with others.

*The bus drops us off on the side of what looks to be an empty road. Our teacher leaders guide us through a wooded path with a narrow boardwalk built on top of the damp grass. The path opens up into a wider space in the woods, where thick beige ropes hang high in the trees and large wooden beams are firmly planted into the ground. We find ourselves in a ropes course park.*

*We are greeted by a soft-spoken woman with thin blonde hair. She wears cargo shorts and work boots. Her whisper of a voice quiets the group, and we lean in to hear her instructions. She tells us gently, “you are going to have to work together as a team to be able to pass these tasks.”*

*The instructor brings us to a flat space in the woods where a series of ropes are tied between two trees, creating a wall of entangled rope, standing about ten feet tall. Inside this flat roped wall, intricate webs of knots are tied, creating different shaped holes. Our task is for our entire group of twelve students to crawl, step, or jump through these holes to the other side without our bodies touching any parts of the rope.*

*Immediately, Justin devises a plan. He enthusiastically directs the shorter group members through the smaller holes that are higher up on the wall and the taller members of the group through the larger ground-level holes. Attempt after attempt, one of us manages to touch the rope with a hand, shoulder, or head, forcing us to all start over. After a few more times, we realize that Aditya, the heavier boy from India, continues to smack his forehead against the rope, just above the rim of his thick, black glasses.*

*After a few times, the group and I are laughing along with him, perplexed at his lack of coordination. Even when we remind him to not dive head first through the hole, he manages to*

*throw his body at the rope structure, hitting it every single time. Justin realizes that he needs to help Aditya.*

*“Make your body smaller!,” Justin jokingly shouts. “Smaller!,” he repeats while laughing. Justin, who lived in India for four years now lives in Southern California. He wears a bright blue tank top and a white sweat band across his forehead. He always seems to be on the brink of bursting into laughter. As Aditya still cannot manage to fit through the hole in the rope wall, Justin jogs over to him flailing his arms in an attempt to further explain what needs to be done. Though Aditya does not say anything, his lips crack a slight smile at Justin’s enthusiasm.*

*Then, I hear Justin begin to speak in Hindi to Aditya. Perhaps he thought it might be easier for him to understand. As I overhear the Indian language, I see the mannerisms of Justin begin to relax and slow down. I stand there in the middle of the woods stunned by the way this rambunctious Southern Californian teenager can almost suddenly become relatable to this quiet boy from India. I have to admit, I did not see myself becoming friends with either Aditya or Mayank. They are so quiet and simply not the kind of people I normally make friends with. Yet, Justin is someone who I could imagine I would be friends with. So, wouldn’t this mean that by association I could become friends with the two Indian boys as well? I keep forgetting that Justin spent four years of his life in India. As I look over at the two boys talking, I start to see Aditya laugh a bit more. He uncrosses his arms and widens his stance. I squint at him for a moment, and I really start to see him. I see his awkward sense of humor behind his dark brown eyes and I hear the laughs he tries to contain behind his closed-lip smile. He’s no longer just the shorter Indian boy with the glasses.*

*After Justin’s pep talk, Aditya kneels down in preparation for the next attempt through the ropes course. Slowly and carefully, he inches his body toward the rope wall. Finally, he gets*

*all the way through, unscathed. The rest of us move through our respective holes, carefully lifting up our smaller group members through the higher openings. After about thirty minutes of strategizing and making attempts, we all finally make it through to the other side.*

This task, which required us to literally lift each other up, coach each other through, and act as guides and supports for one another, brought us closer in more ways than one. I can imagine the individuals in my group, including me, taking a few steps closer to Aditya and Mayank, who started off on the outskirts of the group. I remember watching Justin and his compassion for Aditya and his ease in relating to him. I was impressed by Justin's nature, forgetting that he lived in India for four years. He seemed similar to me - bubbly, social, silly; I saw him as this relaxed Southern California boy. Yet, there was this whole other side to him that allowed him to be relatable to people of another culture, a culture that he was once a part of. I truly thought of him as this "middle-man" between "full-Indians" who lived in India and us Americans. He was able to connect to many types of people, helping me warm up to others who at first seemed different from me. I saw him as a role model.

While I became close to Justin over the course of the ten days, I also formed an immediate bond with Valeria, Sydney, and Stephanie. Through sharing clothing, staying up late in our dorm telling stories, and talking about our plans for the future, I had never experienced such immediate friendships before. I became especially close with Stephanie. Though we come from different backgrounds, I felt that we shared similar experiences. On some level, we were stuck in the middle of where our parents' immigrated from and where they immigrated to. I specifically remember one conversation with Stephanie; it was the first time we connected on a deeper level:

*As I look into the reflection of our dorm suite's mirror, I see Stephanie behind me straightening my hair with a flat iron. Her soft hands grab pieces of my dark hair and she carefully slides the flat iron down toward the tips of my strands.*

*"You have such nice hair," she holds each word longer and longer.*

*I look at my shiny dark brown, almost black hair. "Really?" I ask in surprise.*

*"Yeah, it's such a pretty color," she explains, again speaking with slow and elongated words.*

*As she continues to straighten my hair, piece by piece, she tells me, "I wish I had darker hair. All my friends back home have darker hair, even my 'fomly' all has dark hair! I honestly don't know how I got this." She jokingly pulls on her own thick, blonde strands. I remember thinking when I first saw her that her hair was thick and poufy, a rare find in most blondes.*

*"Blonde Stephanie, dumb blonde! Like anytime I do anything stupid they immediately say 'oh it's because you're blonde.' How annoying is that?!" She begins to imitate her friends from home, rolling her eyes, yet still keeping a smile on her face. My eyes widen, and with a release of my breath, I excitedly yell, "Same here! But, my friends use the fact that I'm like half-Asian or whatever to make fun of me for not being smart, you know, like the stereotype. They literally will call me 'Dumb Asian'."*

*We both look at each other as if this is the first time we've heard someone else with a similar experience. At least for me, this was the first time. Though we are talking about instances of our annoyance, we become more and more excited to hear about the other's experience, and our smiles grow bigger with every story.*

*As I look back at this conversation with Stephanie, I feel as though our similarities extended beyond being made fun of by our friends. At the time, I thought that was the sole*

reason why I felt connected to her. But now, I realize there may have been an even deeper connection. Stephanie and I both looked different than all of our friends. She was the blonde amongst a social circle of primarily darker, Hispanic girls. I was the opposite: a girl with darker features amongst a group of primarily white friends. Though Stephanie is not of a mixed background, her unique appearance relative to her peers seems to align with the idea of a liminal self. She felt momentarily isolated or on the border of her normal social group. At some points in time, through the pauses in the jokes, we were the outliers. We were the ones whose bubbly and silly personalities were sarcastically attributed to our race or our overall appearance. We were the scapegoats of the jokes. We both felt bothered, yet not traumatized in any way. It was an annoyance that influenced part of our identity, an identity which we could share together and even piece together in order to make sense of it all. Even though I learned a lot about my identity through appearance at a younger age, this concept still played an important role in connecting to the deeper layers of my overall self.

Other times when I was able to connect with Stephanie as well as Valeria and Sydney would be when I asked them to speak in Spanish with me. Excited to help, they began to speak in much slower, clearer Spanish; although, it was still difficult for me to understand:

*“Como estás...muy bien... la lengua...sí, sí.....” I can only make out every few words that Valeria and Sydney beautifully speak to each other. They start to laugh; clearly, I did not understand there was a joke involved. Nervously, I begin to speak in short, present tense sentences, and even with every word I butcher, they encourage me more and more. They remind me how to say certain words and kindly correct my grammar. I can’t possibly imagine how they are able to both speak and think so easily in Spanish and English!*

*As the two of them continue on the conversation allowing me to practice, I see Stephanie carefully observing what is being said. She seems to wait for the appropriate time to join our conversation. Almost timidly, she chimes in, speaking a bit slower than Valeria and Sydney. I can tell that at some points, the two tilt their heads or squint their eyes in confusion. I wonder if it's Stephanie's accent that is making it harder for them to understand. Earlier, they stated that Sergio's Spanish accent was beautiful. I, however, did not notice any difference between them. Isn't their Spanish all the same?*

*As the conversation between the four of us girls continues, Justin waltzes in. He skips over to where we are sitting and Stephanie pauses to greet him.*

*"So you do speak Spanish!" Justin jokes with Stephanie.*

*"Um yeah! I'm from Miami and my parents are from Colombia! I grew up speaking Spanish and English." She defends herself.*

*Still laughing, Justin jokes, "Well I've just never heard you speak it. Hey, you could have just been like 'oh I speak Spanish, I speak Spanish,' and then you don't actually!" Even this early on, we all know that he is only joking around with her.*

*"Well, my go-to language is English, like I primarily speak that. But, I can speak Spanish if I want." Stephanie tries to explain. I can tell she wants to present herself clearly. It seems as though she doesn't want to be seen as any less 'Hispanic' than Valeria and Sydney. But, aren't they more Hispanic? They grew up and live in Honduras. They speak Spanish with their friends and learned English in school. Stephanie may have learned Spanish at home, but she speaks English with her friends and in school. Does this make her "less Hispanic" than Sydney, Valeria, or her parents? She's certainly more of her parents than I am of my mother. At least she knows their native language. She even has an accent.*

Looking back on this experience now, I realize that I was able to pick up on Stephanie justifying her cultural identity to Justin. Although it was not obvious that she was annoyed, a part of me knew that she was. I felt that she was embarrassed and she was trying to remind others, as well as herself, that she really is like Sydney and Valeria.

Now, I'm wondering if she was trying to remind herself that she is not so different from her own parents who immigrated to the United States. Perhaps she did not want to feel like she existed in this separate category, one that classified her parents with Sydney and Valeria, leaving out herself. From what I understood, almost all of Stephanie's friends were born in Florida to immigrant parents. They were living in similar situations. But, when Stephanie came to Chicago, she met people who were more "Hispanic" than she, and perhaps she wanted to fulfill her culturally unique self.

Now, when I meet people my age who have lived in the Philippines, I not only feel a slight sense of envy, but I classify them into this unique, more cultured world that I wish I could be a part of. Through collecting together my memories, this experience reminds me of how I felt back in the third grade when I lied that I was born in the Philippines. Of course, Stephanie was not lying about her extensive Spanish knowledge, but I believed that she felt the need to justify how much she belonged to her culture, or how much her parents' heritage belonged to her identity. Maybe my lie that I was born in the Philippines really was an attempt to not only feel unique, but also to feel closer to that side of me.

Though I grew extremely close to Stephanie, Valeria, and Sydney in only a few days, there were other members of the program who I did not grow as close to. For instance, I barely spoke to a girl named Sonia, from India, who was very quiet and reserved. Though I did not



contemplate at the time my own reasons for not getting to know her, I recognized other people's attitudes towards her:

*After a long day of sightseeing and attending college tours at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, my suitemates Stephanie, Valeria, and Kara - a sweet, blonde girl from California - all are lying down on the bedroom floor. Sydney, who is rooming in another suite down the hall, sits with us as well. In our pajamas, we comfortably lean our backs against the beds, waiting for our freshly painted nails to dry. I hear footsteps coming from our common room.*

*"Kaarrraa!?", a girl yells and Kara quickly sits up from the floor. She runs over to find Macie, a big-framed girl wearing light blue jeans and a plaid button-down shirt. I remember from earlier today that Macie and Kara seemed to become close friends during the college tours. They linked arms running across Northwestern University's cafeteria, laughing with each other at their inside jokes. Though Kara is my suitemate, I notice that she sometimes branches off from the group of Stephanie, Valeria, Sydney, and me. She and Macie, the two non-minority girls from California and Kansas, respectively, seem to stick together. Of course, there are other white students in this program, yet many of them are from places like South Africa and Albania and many of them speak two languages. I honestly wonder how they got invited here.*

*Macie cuts off the rude thoughts in my head, and I smile at her, hoping that my slight questioning of their presence is not obvious. She starts to speak in her subtle mid-western accent.*

*"You will not believe what I have to deal with this time," Macie complains to Kara, but loud enough for all of us to hear.*

*"What happened?," I asked, curiously.*

*“My roommate, Sonia, the girl from India, hasn’t washed her hair since we’ve been here. She hasn’t once taken off her head scarf thing. It’s disgusting and the room smells so bad because of her,” Macie explains to us. She pushes up her eyebrows and widens her eyes, almost as if she wants us to feel even more badly for her.*

*“And!” Macie adds, “she” [Macie pauses for suspense,] “is getting... an... arranged... marriage.” Macie leaves her jaw hanging open. I look around the bedroom at all of the girls and we are all quiet for a few moments. I believe we are imagining our own lives if our parents were to force us to marry a stranger who we did not love. I had never met anyone that would be getting an arranged marriage.*

*After Macie tells us this information, the mood shifts from one of laughter and gossip to discomfort and pity. Sonia lives in a whole other world. Her world is beyond a capacity for me to fully understand. But, I do feel as though I am closer to an understanding than Macie.*

As I reflect on this conversation, I am surprised at my reaction. I have to admit that if a very similar situation would have arisen with my friends from back home, at that point in my life, I most likely would have laughed at this girl like Macie did. I would have done so without guilt and without reflection. But in Chicago with my new friends who were from all over the world, I could not allow myself to succumb to the jokes. Dubois (1996) might have said that I existed in a “double consciousness,” a hybrid space where I was navigating between two cultural groups in my decision of who to defend (as cited in Smith & Leavy, 2008). Smokowski and Bacallao’s (2011) might add that I also used my ability of “cognitive frame switching, which is the individual’s ability to shift between cultural scripts to match environmental demands” (p. 111). They describe how mixed race individuals might use “cultural primes” to recognize which environment they currently find themselves in, guiding them how to act. Though I was

surrounded primarily by Hispanic girls, they were the cultural primes that may have set my frame of mind to one that is less judgmental of other minorities, including Indian girls like Sonia. Their presence made me feel a part of this cultural minority group, one which I felt proud to belong to. But, I also have to remember that beyond the conditioning forces of who I was surrounded by, I made my own personal decision to not laugh along with the others. My decision was not just a result of these forces, being the race of my surrounding peers; my decision was made by the whole me (May, 1953).

My feeling of belonging in this group was even more apparent when I stepped back and questioned why Macie and Kara were invited to the program. They were the ones who stood out. They were not bilingual, they did not live in other countries, and they were white. I remember thinking that although I had a similar upbringing, I at least had my skin color and my ethnic features to justify my presence. Looking back now, I see that I also had my mother's stories, helping me feel a part of this group. I see that it was not just my melanin that helped me connect with other minorities. Perhaps there was something beneath, within my cultural identity, connecting me more to my roots than I had realized.

*On our last night in Chicago, my new friends and I sit down in a circle on the carpeted floor of the dormitory's lobby. My group, with Deb as our teacher leader, joins with another group who we have grown close to over the past ten days. Deb and the other teacher leader ask us to look around at everyone and recognize the differences between us. A silence arises, but with a booming presence. Quietly, my eyes glance at each and every person I have met on this trip. The array of skin tones, languages, values, and memories begins to seep into myself, as if we collectively embody one another. We can look at each other, knowing that our ten days together means something to us. Deb speaks up and begins: "I want us to try to share with each*

*other something about ourselves.” She pauses, and then looks to Sonia first. “I’m wondering if you’d like to start us off. Tell us something about your life that maybe us others don’t already know.” We all look to Sonia. I feel bad because I know she is quiet. I’m not sure how she’ll respond.*

*“Um, well...,” Sonia begins, “I guess something that you all might not know is that in my family, in my culture, we get arranged marriages.” Her voice quiets at the end of her sentence, and although I barely hear what she is saying, I can tell by her hunched-over-posture, downward-looking-eyes, and mouth that only opens up just enough to speak, that she is telling us something personal. She seems to not want to talk about it any further, and we respect her privacy. Deb thanks Sonia for sharing with us. With a few moments of silence, Ahmad, a big guy from Atlanta with dark skin and a deep voice speaks next.*

*“Hey y’all.” Ahmad clears his throat. “Y’all know me as Ahmad. Even though I’m here at this great opportunity, I got to admit that I feel so torn. You see, my high school is in the absolute ghetto. I know kids who’ve shot people. I know somebody who’s killed somebody. But here, everyone’s so motivated and like I’m trying to be like that. Like, I’m the student council president so I’m trying to make a turn in the right direction I guess. But where I’m living, it’s hard, man. Y’all should feel lucky you don’t go to a high school like mine.” Ahmad’s voice chokes up at the end; his eyes are glossy. I stare at his hands that are shaking slightly.*

*I look down, not wanting Ahmad to make eye contact with me in fear that he would see what was really beneath my skin. I do not want him to see the “white” life that I live. Knowing that I have nothing significant enough to share, I sit back, hoping somebody else will chime in. Surprisingly, Nina, the girl from Texas, whose parents are from Mexico and who has the bird-like features, decides to speak up.*

*“Well, I’ve just always been really different.” Nina starts off, speaking with her hands a bit more. Nina only has four fingers on each hand. I remember on the first day, I had to grab her hands for one of the ropes course activities. I remember that they felt rather small and delicate. But, I didn’t think anything of it until Sydney explained to me that both Nina and Nina’s father have the same genetic condition.*

*“I’ve just never felt like I was able to fit in. Like, in my high school, I definitely am on the outside of everything. And, I know I’m quiet, but, you guys are all so nice and welcoming, and it really does mean a lot.” Nina’s mouse-like voice comes to an end. She looks down at the ground, until Sydney who is sitting down next to her, leans over and wraps her arms around Nina. Sydney holds onto Nina for a few seconds as tears drip down from Nina’s face. Sydney tells her that they all love her.*

I am not exactly sure how our group conversation ended, but only a few minutes after Nina shared her story, about four or five of us walked over to the piano that was sitting in the corner of the room. One of us may have suggested that someone play a song. It started off with a few of us playing classic duets like “Heart and Soul,” a song that my mother taught me how to play.

*I’m sitting on the piano bench with Christopher, the boy whose family is from Albania. As I start to play other tunes, he gets up from the piano bench and rejoins the circle of students who are sitting on the floor. Now, it is just me and the piano with all twenty or so students looking up at me, hoping for me to play something, hoping for me to be vulnerable. I think to myself: just as all of us have listened to each other’s stories and experiences, I know that all of them would listen to me play. Although I did not have a story that would reveal any experience of being*

*different, I had the piano keys under my fingers and my shaky voice beneath my smile to show something about who I was beneath my appearance.*

*I strike the keys delicately, yet purposefully. I imagine the piano sheet music of “Listen to Your Heart” circle through my head, guiding me to the notes I need to play. I hear my quiet peers become even more silent as all the sound and focus in the room transfers over to the piano and me.*

*“I know there’s something in the wake of your smile...I get a notion from the look in your eyes, yeah...” I begin to sing nervously, but then with passion.*

*“You’ve built a love, but that love falls apart. Your little piece of heaven...” My voice turns low and soft and I take a breath and reach for the long, high note “turns to dark.” The chorus of the song begins and I feel calm and confident enough to smile while I sing. Though I have never sung in front of a group of people before, their smiles hold me together, guiding me through to the end of the song. Finally, the melody of the piano fades into an echo, which fades into silence. The song is over and everyone in the room takes a pause to ensure that I am finished, and in the same moment, my new peers erupt in applause.*

Looking back on this moment now, I recognize that I felt an overwhelming sense of relief and accomplishment. I was relieved that I had successfully performed a song in front of people, which was something I had never done before. I had accomplished a newfound sense of connection with my friends. I was able to connect with them in a time and space where I could not fully relate to them and their stories of hardship. Being vulnerable enough to sing in front of them opened up a way for us to trust one another.

I realize that this relationship I have with music is more than a way to calm myself down after a hard day or to have the confidence to laugh at myself. Music has become part of my

dialogue. It has always been a way for me to connect with others through being vulnerable and authentic. Throughout my life, I seemed to have connected more with my minority friends than my white friends through music. I often ask myself: why is this the case? Is it because many of my minority friends are involved in artistic clubs and many of my white friends are involved in sports? Or, is it because I am more vulnerable with my friends of color than I am with my white friends? Why is it that the piano, something that my mother brought over from the Philippines, became the tool that would help me connect to my roots and to the diverse people in my life? For me, it was music. For Ariana, it was soccer. For Lily, it was dance. All three of us took in something that our immigrated parents brought over and we felt passion and connection and sometimes even a closeness to our culture through these interests. We all felt a sense of cultural identity, apart from our appearance, and it played a role in how deeply we connected with our minority half.

However, while a part of us felt connected to something that we attributed to our parent's culture, at the same time, we felt a distance from it. We felt like we were in a stage of liminality, as our interests in our parent's background sometimes conflicted with where our identity was planted - in a New England town. While we defended our parents for their different ways of interacting with the community and we tried to connect with other minorities, we were still aware of how we were, in some ways, on the outside peering in. Although I felt compelled to not laugh at Sonia's differences as my sense of belonging to a minority group was developing, I still felt inherently different from Sonia and even the rest of my minority peers. No matter how much I wanted to share their uniqueness and fully understand their stories, I came from a different place. Ariana described a related experience:

Even though I don't really describe myself as a minority, I get really mad when people make comments about my dad's accent, and that's when I feel I most can relate to those

issues [regarding Hispanics]. Growing up, people just assumed my dad was stupid because his English was a little more broken and that would always make me mad.

Ariana felt strongly about defending her father. Although she could not empathize with him since she did not also have an accent, she could offer her sympathy. Similarly, Lily spoke passionately about defending her mother in the white neighborhood her family lived in. She said:

I always feel like I always have to defend my mom. If we go to a store and people can't understand what she's saying because she has a thick accent or if she's asking questions about something, people are almost always annoyed. I have a sense that if people in my town see her and [hear] the way she talks, then they don't take her seriously. That's always an anger point for me that I'll never get over.

Lily spoke about these stories when I asked if she ever felt like she had to serve as a liaison between her mother and people in her town. Immediately, Lily nodded, and explained to me the many times she had to act as a translator, both linguistically and culturally. She understood her mother and she understood the people in her town. However, she never fully identified with either. She felt stuck in the middle, trying to help one make sense of the other. This is similar to how Scott felt when his black and white friends would come into contact; both he and Lily could never truly create a bridge between the two. Ariana also felt like she was not quite fully a minority even though she was very interested in her Spanish background.

I didn't really consider myself a minority in high school because there were so many "actual" minorities. I've never considered myself as "their Hispanic" because it was almost like there were actual Hispanic and Latino people [in my high school]...I've always wanted to relate to the Hispanic students because we share very similar parts of our culture, like soccer for example, but I never quite could.

Lily, Ariana, and I seemed to be aware that although we are interested in the cultures of others, including our parents', we recognize that our own lives growing up in predominantly white areas have already shaped parts of our identity. We could not force the connection with our parents' culture, and as a result, we were left feeling stuck in between, in a state of liminality.



Scott's stories also fit into the picture of feeling not quite like a full minority. Because neither of Scott's parents or grandparents immigrated to the United States, his African-Puerto Rican background is less apparent in his family compared to Lily, Ariana, and me. However, he spoke about the socially constructed "Black culture," which he did not feel fully a part of.

There's a certain way that people expect me to talk. I've definitely heard "you sound white" before. And, I've thought it about myself. [I'll think] "oh this person definitely thinks I sound white." People are surprised by my voice or the way I talk or the words I use or mannerisms. It's almost like speaking two different languages.

Scott recognized this polarity and he seemed defeated in that the differences between the two racial groups made it difficult for him to fully feel a part of either one. These stories of Lily, Ariana, Scott, and me, lead me to ask: why is this liminal self so apparent in both our appearance and our culture? Why is it that we can't feel equally a part of both?

### Chapter 3: Beyond: Identity Through Society

In my struggle to understand where I stood on the layered spectrum of race, my identity was found to exist in a state of liminality. As much as I wanted to be the person to act as a bridge linking the lines of race, I found myself falling in between these lines. This chapter explores how I, and the individuals I interviewed, identified ourselves through societal groupings of race such as stereotypes and racial separations of friend groups. The chapter discusses how creating a post-racial society through the emergence of mixed race might be a myth, one that attempts to ignore the deeply embedded historical legacies of racism, colonization, and imperialism (Morgan, 2016; Latimer, 2005). The interviewees and I all spoke about how the cultural segregation present on campus made it difficult for us to act as bridges between the lines of race. Some of my classmates also commented on the vulnerability of their minority race's history and cultural oppression. They felt that their half minority background granted them only half a voice to speak out on these social issues. However, through this liminality, some of us also seemed to better understand ourselves. Our state of "in-betweenness" may have allowed us to see our mixed race identity as an opportunity to explore our multifaceted nature and connect with multiple social worlds. Understanding our identity through society requires us to think how we can see ourselves beyond our own culture and into the larger picture of race.

#### *College*

During the summer right before college, I received a letter from Holy Cross, inviting me to attend an African Latino Asian Native American (ALANA) program called Odyssey:

*My mother hands me a white envelope stamped with Holy Cross at the top and with my name written in the center. As my excited hands rip open the top of the envelope, a folded, typed letter falls out. I begin reading. I am invited to a week-long summer program before school*

*begins. My eyes jump to the capitalized word "ALANA," which I learn stands for African Latino Asian Native American students. I have never heard of this acronym before. It must be a program for minority students at Holy Cross.*

*"What's it for,?" my mother asks from across the room as she twirls the spoon in her coffee mug.*

*"I think it's a program for minority students, to help them fit into the school, maybe." I explain to my mother.*

*"Oh. Do you want to do it?," she asks slowly and tentatively.*

*I smile, shaking my head. "No, I don't think I'd really fit in." I imagine myself being surrounded by all minority students and first generation college students. I don't think this program is for people like me who grew up in a town like mine. Maybe it's more for lower class students, I think in my head. I'm not sure if I'd really relate to them. My mother seems to agree with my decision, and the matter is no longer discussed.*

*A few weeks later, I see an email from Holy Cross notifying me that my random roommate has been selected. Finally! I take out my phone, scroll down to the bottom, and see that I am living in the dorm Wheeler with one roommate named Hikari.*

*"Hy-Carry?" What kind of name is that? African? Do I have an international roommate? I wonder, trying to imagine this girl in my head. I immediately log onto my Facebook account to see if I can find her. Since her name is not very common, I find her easily. As I look through her Facebook photos, I realize that she is from Miami, she looks Hispanic, and she has tons of pictures of herself and her friends on the beach. She seems pretty cool, actually! I feel a huge sigh of relief, and I can finally relax.*

*My phone buzzes. Hikari messaged me!*

Parts of our conversation from August 1st, 2014:

Kelly: What do you want to major in or are you doing any sports? I'm thinking of psych and I'm running track! [I'm also going to sign up for Spanish and Drawing class]

Hikari: I want to major in psych too and nahh sports [are] really not my thing. I'm more into art and drawing, but I love working out at the gym.

Kelly: Awh I love art!... Wait do you speak Spanish?

Hikari: Yeah, I'm from Panama so I can [definitely] help [you] out with Spanish, I'm actually going to Panama tomorrow.

Kelly: No way I'm so bad at Spanish but I reallllyyy want to learn it fluently. Were you born there?

Hikari: Nah I was born in Florida but both my parents were born in Panama. What's your nationality?

Kelly: I'm half Filipino... yeah I really wanna speak [Spanish] fluently.

Hikari: What music [are you] into?

Kelly: I like a lot of different kinds of music but my favorite artists are One Direction, Macklemore, Taylor Swift, Arctic Monkeys... What about you?

Hikari: Aww wait I can't wait to actually meet you; I LOVE arctic monkeys. And yeah... I like rap, rock like nirvana, red hot chili peppers, sublime, some Spanish music and [Electronic Dance Music].

Kelly: Also... do you pronounce your name like Huh-car-ee or is it different?

Hikari: Nope haha you got it!

Kelly: Okay good!

Hikari: See! I like [you] [already]! No one ever knows how to pronounce my name.

Kelly: How else do people pronounce it?

Hikari: Hy-karry, HUH-kurry. It's awful! Like it's [really] not that hard.

Kelly: That's so annoying

As I look back upon these Facebook messages with someone who became an instant best friend and a roommate of two years, it is intriguing to see the questions we decided to ask the other person. I did not realize it then, but Hikari and I came from two very different backgrounds. I asked her questions about sports and she asked me questions about art. She lived in South Florida - *Soflo*, as she calls it - where most of her friends spoke Spanish. But, I did not see her as being very different from me. From our first conversation, we realized that we both had similar music tastes and we both loved to draw. We connected on an artistic level, something which I later realized helped me connect with her and other minority students at Holy Cross. I imagined Hikari and me getting along the way that Stephanie and I did during my Chicago trip

one year prior. Seeing as they both were from the Miami area and spoke Spanish, I assumed that I would have a similar connected experience, and I did.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Hikari how to pronounce her name, wanting to make sure I would say it correctly before we met. I was relieved that I guessed how to say it correctly on the first try. Realizing that it bothers Hikari when people mispronounce her name, I acted as if it was an obvious pronunciation: "How else would someone pronounce it?" I asked. A few days later, Hikari and I decided to video chat:

*I close the door to my bedroom and walk along the wooden paneled floor toward my desk. The photographs on my corkboard wall have already been removed, leaving only the remains of sticky tape. This is the last week I will be living here in this house. Next week, I'm off to college. I press the button to video chat with my roommate-to-be, anxiously waiting for her to pick up. After a few rings in, she picks up the other end.*

*Hikari answers the video chat, smiling; her face takes up the edges of the screen. We both excitedly say, "hello."*

*"So, how was Panama!?", I ask. I can tell she has still not unpacked. Her clothes are spread out on her bed in the background.*

*"It was amaaazing!" Hikari states, elongating her words. "I got soooo tan?" She ends her sentence in a higher pitched tone, as if she is asking a question. Her skin is bit darker than mine. Why would she want to be more tan when she is already dark?*

*A few minutes into our conversation, I hear Hikari's mother knocking on her door in the background. Immediately, Hikari transitions from speaking English to fluent Spanish. Although I do not know what they are talking about, I listen intently. Once they are done speaking, I tell her how cool it is she is bilingual. I really am amazed. Hikari asks me when I'm moving in and I tell*

*her the day of orientation, which is when most students are supposed to. I ask her the same question.*

*“Oh, I’m moving in a week before you because I’m doing the Odyssey program,” Hikari explains to me. My first reaction is to nod my head in agreement, accidentally revealing that I knew of the program she was speaking about.*

*“Are you doing it too?,” she asks in a hopeful way.*

*“Uhhh... no! I got the letter in the mail but umm...” I search my mind for an excuse. “I had some other things to do before then, so I wanted to spend more time at home.” My response does not make any real sense. I want to get to college as soon as I can. But, there is no way I can tell my new roommate that I did not want to be part of a program that she is clearly excited about. I didn’t want her to think that my reason is because the people would be different from me. Wouldn’t that mean that I thought Hikari would be different from me too? I didn’t think she was.*

Although I am not positive, I think I questioned at the time whether Hikari would enjoy Odyssey. I believe I had assumed she was so like me that she would also feel out of place in this “minority” program. Looking back, I wish that I had participated in it. I was so grateful for the experience I had in Chicago, and I can guess that this would have been somewhat similar. Why was I so interested in the People to People program and not Odyssey? Perhaps it was the different ways they were presented to me. The People to People trip in Chicago was branded as an academic student conference that just so happened to select individuals of diverse backgrounds, whereas Odyssey was transparent in that they only accepted minority and first-generation students. I believe programs like Odyssey are extremely important in integration and socialization. But, at the time, its parameters did not match the way I identified myself, or at least

the way I thought I did. Only now do I know that this would have been an eye-opening and enriching opportunity. I wonder if others who were not as connected to their minority status chose not to participate in Odyssey for the same reasons as me. I wonder if they also regret it.

*Still video chatting, Hikari tells me that she is a first-generation American. Both of her parents are from Panama and she was born in Florida. Although I know what “first-generation American” means, I hardly ever hear it being used. I half-jokingly respond, “I am a first-generation American, but only on my mom’s side.”*

*Yet, as these words slip out of my mouth, I end it upwards into a question. Does this identity even count? Can someone even be a first-generation American on just one side of the family? I take a step back for a minute and realize that even though I was not born in the Philippines, I have this interesting category of identity that brings me just as close as one can get to being born in one’s native country. In terms of nationality, I am just one step away from my mother, just as Hikari is from hers.*

Looking back, I find many similarities between my friendships with Hikari and Stephanie. At the time, I classified them as interesting, sociable girls who I knew I would get along with. Their talkative and easy-going personalities allowed me to naturally connect with them. I also thought of them as intriguing future roommates because their parents were from other countries and they spoke that native language. I did not realize at the time, however, that Stephanie and Hikari identified with their racial background way beyond the extent to which I did.

My first week of college was a time of tension in my identity, a time where part of my past was halted at the front gates of campus, where the moment my parents dropped me off, a piece of my identity drove away with them. This aspect of myself was colored by my parents,

my family, and the people I grew up with. On entering a social situation like the first week of college, no one but I knew about the people in my life. At first glance, no one could see the narrow spectrum of colors that existed in my hometown. A part of my identity was hidden from those around me, leaving me more aware of how I came to be and who I wanted to become.

*I shuffle my brand new pair of Sperry's over the thinly carpeted floor of the campus dining hall entrance. I hand over my student ID to the elderly lady at the desk who swipes it into the machine. After giving me a gentle nod, she smiles as she hands it back. Quickly, I slide my ID into the back pocket of my jeans, masking my photo. We took these photos during summer orientation in the campus library a few months back. I figure it must have been the combination of poor lighting in the library's back room with my dark skin from the summer sun, creating my not-so-flattering, very dark photo.*

*My roommate and I place our backpacks on the chairs next to the deep brown mahogany table in the far back corner of the dining hall. She tells me that some of her friends she met in the Odyssey program are going to meet us for dinner. As I scurry around the dining hall food stations, I pile on pasta, chicken, and vegetables until my mountain of food finds the edges of the plate. The two of us sit back down, and soon enough, Hikari's friends from Odyssey join us. I don't know any of them.*

*As I reach my right arm out to pick up my fork, I pass the fork to my left hand about to dig into my dinner. Yet, before I do so, my eyes glide along the stretched table, absorbing the colorful dark palette of the students surrounding me. The vague outline of their skin brushes over one another, melding into a mixture of neutral tones. With the dim lighting and the deep brown mahogany table top, the group's black hair and darker skin blend into the distance. Their muffled conversations rush over me. It is as if I am sitting in an air tight bubble, and the sounds*



*of conversations never reach my core, and I cannot reach through to them. I turn my head to face my shoulder searching around the dining hall for the judging eyes of others who would easily spot how much I stood out. Yet, as my eyes wander further, I realize no one was looking. I look down and see my own fingers wrapped around my fork and through a split second of connection, I trace the dark outline of my own tan hands and I realize that I too blend in.*

This experience in the dining hall was a prominent moment in my life. I felt so out of place and I was worried that other people noticed my discomfort. But, in just a moment, I realized that no other person looking at me could have noticed that I was any different. It was as if, suddenly, I stood outside of myself, and “I” saw “me” from across the dining hall. In this momentary glimpse of consciousness, my distorted self-image melted away. “I” saw a reality of “me” from an outsider’s view, one which recognized that I did not look any different than the people I was sitting with (May, 1953; James, 1961). Almost immediately after this experience, I felt guilty, embarrassed even. I felt like I betrayed my racial background, that I was a phony, and that I was fake.

Starting from my childhood and leading up to this moment, my mixed race identity began with an unaware self, when I did not know that I looked different. Then, I transitioned to a unique self, when I felt proud of my special background. Finally, I moved to a liminal self, when I sometimes felt out of place within both white groups of friends and minority groups of friends. Yet, what is most interesting is that in this moment in the dining hall, both my unaware self and liminal self were present. It began with my shame regarding my student ID picture, which cast a dark shadow across my face, accentuating the features I have tried to hide in the past. The picture made me feel out of place from how I usually saw myself, as if I did not belong to my own body.

It was as if “I” as the knower, and “me” as the known were detached from each other and caught in between my two racial halves (James, 1961).

Yet, while feeling in between two sides of me, I simultaneously forgot that I visually blended in with the minority students around me. I was unaware of how I appeared to others. In this moment, I found myself experiencing both the liminal and unaware self; I felt out of place, yet I also could not even remember who I was. This inner contradiction of trying to cover up something that I forgot I even had created this sense of uneasiness in my identity. While my unaware self and liminal self were in conflict with each other, I realize that my unique self was nowhere to be found. How could I have felt unique about the fact that my mother grew up in the Philippines, yet I felt like I knew nothing about her culture? As I sat in the dining hall, I overheard these students speaking in Spanish and reminiscing about their times with their families in their home countries. From the food they ate to the Spanish that rolled off their tongues, I was no longer the unique one of the group.

Overall, my first year of college was a true test of my identity and my mental strength. As I bounced from acquaintance to stranger, I struggled to create mutual, genuine connections to any group of people. While I became very close to my roommate Hikari, I was lost on the outside of several groups of friends, never feeling fully invited in. People would ask Hikari and me if we were sisters. They would also ask if we knew each other before college because we spent most of our time together. A few girls mentioned they were envious of how close I was with my roommate; yet, they had no idea that I was mentally and emotionally exhausted from the constant effort I would put in trying to break into the social circles of other friend groups. I was very fortunate to have such open and deep conversations with Hikari, who knew how much I was struggling to find a friend group. From not knowing enough people to sit with at dinner to

nervously striking up conversations with girls on my team, I simply could not find the words that would click with others, words that would show them that I really did mean well and that I really was like them.

I remember being on the phone with my parents, attempting to hide the fact that I did not have a circle of friends, something that I always found to be so easy and normal back in my hometown. I specifically remember my father asking me if I felt that people treated me differently at Holy Cross because I was a minority. I was shocked at the question, particularly because it had never even crossed my mind. I was unaware that that was even a possibility. Then, I started to ask myself: was the reason I was struggling to make friends with the white students at my school - the group I tended to gravitate towards - because of the way I looked? I honestly had not considered it before. But, I started to see how people might not know how to categorize me. I did not even know which category I belonged to. I tended to eat my meals with Hikari and her minority friends who she started to hang out with more; yet, I would be seen at night with my white teammates. From the outside, I could imagine people might have considered me as someone who had a lot of different friends. In reality, I was not close to or comfortable with either group.

I desperately tried to connect with my teammates, and admittedly, I only found myself with Hikari's friends at first because I had no one else. As selfish as my mindset was at the time, it was the honest, raw truth. That truth, though, was partially a result of my upbringing. It makes sense that I naturally gravitated towards the white students at my school. Though they did not look like me, my connection with them went beyond the outline of race. It extended into our similar interests, backgrounds, and culture. The way my teammates talked, their sense of humor, their similar upbringing, brought me a sense of comfort, as I saw parts of my high school friends

in them. Even though I slowly grew closer to two girls who I met through Hikari - Aleia and Marian - I explained to them my desire to have that big group of friends similar to the one that I had in high school. Rather than becoming offended, the three of them understood and supported my goal of becoming friends with my team. Our openness with each other allowed them to be happy for me once I finally became close to my teammates.

As they supported me through my struggles, I grew extremely close to Aleia, especially. During sophomore year, she ended up telling me with the most genuine voice how happy she was for me because I had finally found the friend group I was looking for. I remember when I first met Aleia, I was thrown off by her big personality. Yet, I began to let my guard down and after the first few months of school I remember telling Hikari:

*“I actually really love Aleia. I feel bad that I didn’t think me and her would become friends,” I sheepishly admit to Hikari, anxiously wondering how she will respond to what I have said about one of her best friends.*

*Hikari nods and looks at me directly. I can tell that what I told her was not any news to her. “Don’t worry, I knew you weren’t sure about her at first.” She tells me calmly.*

*“She’s different from you,” Hikari says lightly and sweetly. I know that she is referring to how our upbringings and cultural backgrounds are different. I know Hikari is acknowledging that that played the main role in my uncertainty about Aleia. Finally, I know that Hikari thinks it is okay and that I am not a bad person.*

As I look back now, I believe my struggle to create connections with others was not an outcome of my minority status, but an outcome of my uncertainty with my own identity, my liminal sense of self. I felt constantly pushed and pulled between two very different groups of friends; one was primarily white, the other, primarily minorities. I felt as though my time was

split and I was left, at first, without deep connections to either group. Yet, as I eventually became closer with my track friend group, I naturally spent less and less time with my original friends, Hikari, Marian, and Aleia. This realization made me put more effort into spending time with these three girls who had supported me and had been open and honest with me. Though I may not live with them as roommates, I cherish the moments when we are able to get together and catch up.

### *No Choice but to Choose*

The ideal scenario would have been to combine these two groups of friends. Unfortunately, they seemed to exist in entirely different worlds, which I could not bridge. The places they would hang out in were on separate sides of campus. The dining hall tables acted as categories of people, who simply could not and would not be seen sitting in the wrong chair. It was dark and then it was light; there was hardly any in-between. I remember my father, who graduated from Holy Cross in 1979, describing the segregation at the time. Almost forty years later, and the barrier between race has only partially faded.

The divide extends beyond the dining hall and into the night life of the students. Parties that would take place off-campus consisted primarily of white students, while parties that took place on-campus were minority students. This constant separation made it difficult for me to become equally close to both groups of friends. How could I have tried to befriend two different groups when the separation seemed to never end? I always had to choose one or the other; it could almost never be both.

Beyond the separation of these students, I noticed an up-close difference in their areas of interests and what activities they were a part of. In a very general sense, I connected with most of my white friends through sports and academics. Our interactions, jokes, and stories would be

shared on the runs I would go on with my teammates, who I would then study with after practice. With my minority friends, however, I would connect with them during my spare time often surrounding our shared interests of art, dance, and music. From playing the piano and singing with them, to learning the choreographed dance from the hip-hop team, I always felt connected to Hikari and Aleia through our shared artistic interests. I found different ways to communicate with my new friend group and ways to keep in touch with my original one. I grew to understand myself as someone who was brought up with a heavy white influence, yet was handed subtle cultural stories and interests allowing me to connect with my mother's heritage and even more deeply with my minority half.

Since the people who knew me naturally fell into separate groups, I seemed to have constructed multiple social selves, allowing my distinct groups of peers to bring out different sides of me. Whether it was the values I voiced, topics I talked about, or way I spoke, I almost instinctively interacted with my friends in different ways. Though my many social selves helped me connect with different groups of friends, I wonder if they are also partly why I couldn't act as the bridge between them. I knew who I was within each group. But, I may not have known exactly who I was when they were, rarely, brought together (James, 1961). Because of the separation and groupings of race on campus, I felt a pressure to choose which social self I most identified with. Ariana took notice of the cultural and racial segregation on campus:

I think that our campus is hugely segregated. You walk into Kimball [and] you will see this. You will find three tables with people who identify as minorities and then there's white tables all the rest. I think it's very apparent in friend groups [too]. I've always picked up on it. And, I don't hear a ton of people talking about this. It might be that people see it and attribute it to different things. Or, it might be that people don't see it, or don't want to, or don't care.

Scott also became aware of this phenomenon as time went on in college, acknowledging that it was not until this point that he began to understand the racial disparities in the world.

Scott's friend group completely shifted. After the ALANA program he participated in during the summer, he interacted with mostly minority students. He would attend their parties, which were filled with black and Latino students dancing *bachata*. Scott himself was a good dancer; he even wanted to audition for the school's hip-hop team. Instead, he decided to join a sports team, and in that decision, he realized he indirectly chose a different racial friend group. He said, "as the school year went on, I started hanging out with less of the black students and more of [my] team, who were white kids except for a few." Because there was rarely any mixing between the two groups, Scott's friends completely changed. He explained that even if he were to take part in both the dance team and the sports team, he would eventually have to choose at some point. He admitted, "I don't think I'd be as close to either group because that would have split me in a certain way."

Scott ended this portion of the interview saying something that stuck with me. He told me, "everything is a choice of where to spend your time. That's why it's sad because if you do choose to try to exist in both groups you end up existing less in each." Scott acknowledged the sad truth about the inevitability of becoming less connected to a group of people as he spent more time with another. He had no choice but to choose. Though he recognized that he made the right decision of deeply connecting with one group, as opposed to being less connected to two, he seemed saddened by the outcome of his relationship with some of his old minority friends. He admitted to me, "I think a lot of the minority students I was friends with kind of felt betrayed. They used to tell me I'd changed, and to a certain degree I kind of get where they're coming from. But, it also wasn't something that I tried. It was just something that kind of happened."

Lily felt similarly about the separation between racial groups on campus, and she made the decision early on to cling to her minority side. She told me she did not want to be associated

with the “white mindset,” admitting that even though it was half of her, she felt that her Filipino side explained more about her. Yet, as Lily made the choice to identify with her minority side, she still felt the need to make her racial identity apparent to other people. Lily told me that, even though she felt more herself and more “at home” with the racial minorities on her dance team, there were occasions when they would point out her differences, reminding her that she was only half of them. She told me that a few of the girls told her they didn’t expect her to be a good hip-hop dancer, presumably because she looks white.

Lily also attempted to bring together some of her friends across different groups. She invited some of her white friends into the mix; however, they responded with a social anxiety about the racial, or more likely cultural, lines that were becoming blurred. She explained:

I see separation mainly in parties on the weekends. A dancing party [in an on-campus dorm] is going to have a lot of minorities there. [But] an off-campus party where there’s a keg...it’s just a big difference. I have friends in both places and if I were to be like “hey, I’m having a party in [this dorm],” people would be like “oh, I don’t do parties like that.” And, maybe it’s coming from them being uncomfortable about what we do like dancing and stuff. [It’s also] even just the social aspect. I’ve heard people saying “I don’t even know what I would talk about.”

Lily’s struggle for others to accept her Filipino identity as well as her inability to convince her white friends to hang out with her minority friends made her feel stuck in between two groups, existing in a state of liminality. Interestingly, out of all the interviewees, Lily seems to be the most immersed with friends of color. Even further, while Lily may be Filipino, her friends are actually primarily Hispanic. I think back to when my mother taught me the old Spanish song on the guitar and her telling me that we are a mix of Spanish descent. I also think back to people mistaking me for Hispanic; strangers often walk up to me asking questions in Spanish. Why is it that both Lily and I tend to gravitate towards and feel more comfortable with our Latino peers instead of Filipino ones? Sociologist Anthony Ocampo writes about how second-generation



Filipinos, such as Lily and me, might relate more toward Latino culture than Asian American culture partly because of their ties in Spanish colonialism, the Spanish language, and Catholicism (Ocampo, 2013). I wonder if this connection furthers our liminality: we don't fully identify with our Asian culture, but we also are not Hispanic.

It is clear that Scott, Ariana, Lily, and I are aware of the separation of race and culture at the College. We also were aware of how that constant separation influenced our peer groups, making it difficult to bring together people across different races. Scott stated, "honestly, I've never felt like I could serve as a link between the two groups." The places on campus and the clubs people were involved in were all tied to a particular racial group, discouraging students from crossing over into what seemed like a whole new world. As students of mixed race, we felt a connection to many social spheres of the school. Unfortunately, it became almost necessary for us to make a choice of who we primarily spent our time with.

This idea of choice resonates within many critical works of literature about mixed race. In Michele Elam's (2011) *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, she writes, "for the select few perceived as racially ambiguous by a dominant culture, race does involve a heightened ability to make situational choices about one's racial identity" (p. 49). For me, I decided to put effort in becoming friends with my white teammates. My choice came out of comfort in the environment I grew up in, but it was also maintained and supported by the separation of race. This brings me to the question: how could some critics say that we are living in a post-racial society when the lines of racial groups still remain visible?

Another important question is: do we even want to live in a post-racial society? As cited in Danielle Morgan's (2016) article "Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity," she comments that Elam's idea of choosing one's racial identity can align with the understandable

“desire for the traditional and comforting racial categories” (p. 5). She goes on to say that “post-racial continues to reify the racial hierarchy as it implies the normative status of whiteness” (p. 6). Where do we find the balance of feeling comfortable in our own skin and the skin around us versus creating unity across race? Even though mixed race individuals fall in between these two sides, we might not be the answer to all of this. What some of us know is that we seem to have no choice but to cling more closely to one side of our racial identity.

### *Half a Voice*

It seems clear that tension exists between the racially separated friend groups on campus. An even more complex tension is found within some of the perspectives of mixed race individuals, who seem to be in the middle of it all. For instance, Ariana wanted to voice her opinion relating to the social issues of Latino students; however, she felt as though she was not Hispanic enough to voice her thoughts. She described a conversation she had with her roommate, whose family is from the Dominican Republic. Her roommate told Ariana that “every month is the month for you guys and we only have this [heritage month].” Ariana responded to her roommate saying, “you’re 100% right.” Even though she felt connection and sympathy for her roommate, Ariana recognized her own inability to fully understand her roommate’s struggle. Her roommate even made a distinction between herself and Ariana by associating Ariana with other white people, grouping them as “you guys.” Ariana agreed with this separation, saying that she “kind of felt on the outside sometimes when [her roommate] would invite her friends over who were also Latinas.” This is something that she has acknowledged for a long time. Ariana was never comfortable attending ALANA celebrations or being a part of the Latin American Student Organization (LASO) because she “[did not want] it to come across as this Neocolonialism thing where this Spanish girl comes and tries to take over.” She told me that she felt like her heritage,

something that she is so proud of, was at fault. It is possible that Ariana put this tension on herself; but it is also possible that the College's cultural climate made it even more difficult for her to voice her opinions on these issues. She did not feel comfortable aligning her voice with other Hispanic students; but, she also told me that she is bad at vocalizing her opinions on Hispanic issues with her white friends. She described herself as going on "internal crusades in terms of immigration" because her friends don't actually know how important her Spanish identity is for her. She "never felt like there was a place for [her] to talk about it."

Ariana understood that she felt closer to her Spanish identity with her friends from home and when she used to be closer with her roommate. Though she does not resent any of her current friends, she is a bit saddened by the fact that they are unaware of this important part of her identity. Yet, Ariana is still very close to them and loves them as friends. Maybe she realizes that we don't have to be exactly like our friends in order to be close to them. She admitted, in an accepting tone, that she "always felt a bit different in [her] friend group and a bit different with groups of minorities." Ariana described a time when she and a friend disagreed on a racial issue. Though she was annoyed, the conversation made her think more deeply about herself and, perhaps, confirmed her stance on this issue even more. She explained:

When I was applying for colleges, I would have friends that would come up to me and be like "oh, you're lucky, you get to check off Hispanic." They would imply that I don't get discriminated against, but I get to use this [advantage]. But, my last name being Hispanic, I could potentially face discrimination in the workforce. It bothered me because it also implied that other Hispanics don't deserve it.

Although she might not feel entirely connected to minority students, she knows where her stance is on these issues even if she cannot voice them herself. Existential psychologist Rollo May (1953) reminds us that it is vital we do not "substitute activism for awareness." Here, Ariana might not feel comfortable "doing something" for the Hispanic issues she cares about, but she

certainly is aware of how she identifies with it. She still feels alive even through this liminality of where to voice her identity, and it is her liminality that is prompting these important questions.

Scott's college experience of learning to find his voice as a half-black individual was reinforced through his education. Even though his friend group shifted towards white peers, he found his voice in standing up for social issues. He casually stated, "I didn't even realize there was racism until I came to college, until I starting paying attention to the world and studying history." Though his comment may have been a bit of an exaggeration, Scott spoke about his prior unawareness of the societal implications of what it means to be black. Gradually, he began to feel a duty to find his voice on black social issues:

Since I came to college, I've been more aware of [the black part of my racial identity] and more proud of it in a lot of ways. To a certain degree, there is an obligation to pay attention so that when you are having these conversations you know what arguments are being made. When these conversations happen you don't want to be ignorant of it.

Scott recognized that he had a lot to learn from other people first in order to find a voice of his own. He started learning about his background from his grandmother, reading the newspaper every day, and taking African history classes. He began to protect his own identity and the societal identity of the black community. For example, Scott called out one of his white friends who wanted to get cornrows in his hair, a culturally black hairstyle. He voiced his opinion by "removing [himself] from the conversation" and telling his friend "why other people would find it offensive." Even if Scott may have not been personally offended, he understood his own duty to defend a more communal identity that is partially outside himself. He even admitted that he "doesn't think [he] would have ever done that three years ago." He noticed a change within himself, an awareness of his developing identity.

Scott's identity eventually became inseparable from the history of oppression of his race. He was careful to not overstep any boundaries regarding who he identified with, and he

understood the seriousness of protecting the identity of socially constructed black culture. He admitted that, rightfully so, “there is a certain defense or wall that’s up. For good reason, black people are on the defense and testing everything that’s trying to come through.” Scott gave an example of the difference in vulnerability when identifying with whites versus identifying with blacks and minorities in general:

[My friend Rob who is fully Latino]...is very proud of it. He gets along with our group but he’s clearly different; he’s clearly not white. But, when he goes and hangs out with black and Latino students, he fits in with that group. It’s harder for me because it seems fake, disingenuous, like [I can’t say] “oh now I’m black, now I’m ready to be friends with them.” I’m a little offputting to minority students in a way. Whereas, if it was the other way around, like when Rob hangs out with us, it’s not like [we say] “oh you’re trying to get in with us because we’re white.”

He justified this by tying the vulnerability of black identity to references of blacks overcoming historical oppression. He said, “especially these days, being black is a very distinctive thing and it ought to be protected. People are taking pride in it again. Black people are taking back a lot of their own culture [by] saying, ‘this is ours, give us the credit for it.’”

Referring back to Morgan (2016), she responds to the semi-autobiographical work *Loving Day* (2015), saying “the connection of a particular half-black male may be better marked by a sense of allegiance and protection...He must demonstrate a careful articulation of blackness, rather than mere fascination with its accoutrements” (p. 4). Both Scott and Ariana were careful of the way they voiced and articulated their concerns for their minority half. Trying to find the balance of caring for others without overstepping into the realm of fascination exemplifies an important aspect of their liminal selves. After all of the interviews were over, I seem to have ended in a place of liminality, confusion, and questions. Where do we go from here? Where should society stand? Where does my identity stand?

This cultural and racial separation at Holy Cross, among other colleges, indicates that we are not yet a post-racial society. Before beginning this thesis, I was focused on understanding how mixed race individuals could serve as this middle-person, this link, bringing together people across different races. However, our mixed race identities in this culturally segregated society seem to pull us away from both of our racial backgrounds. This experience of liminality existed within us prior to college as we had already noted our ambiguous appearances and our subtle cultural stories shared by only one side of us. This liminal experience, though, seemed to be reinforced as we searched for our identity in college, navigating our way in between our two halves.

So, where does this state of liminality leave us? We understand that serving as the link between races is a complex matter, as our multifaceted identities are still evolving. The idea that the increase in mixed race individuals will be the key to racial unity, or a post-racial society, is more complicated than it appears (Morgan, 2016). How can mixed race individuals bring races together if they themselves experience life in between their two sides? How can we serve as the link between people who exist in such separate worlds? My thesis advisor proposed an interesting and thought provoking question: might it not be the case that melding together different racial and cultural lines may blend away the uniqueness of it all? Of course, both of us recognize that bridging the gap is crucial. Yet, in the process of unity we cannot forget that recognizing the differences is also an essential part of the authentic human experience. From Renn's (2004) *Mixed Race Students in College: The Ecology of Race, Identity, and Community on Campus*, she cites three mixed race identity theorists. They describe how a mixed race person may not just achieve an identity of being multiracial, but may also find a sense of positive alterity (Weisman, 1996), positive marginality (Daniel, 1996), or a specialness in her otherness

(Root, 1990). There might be something that can be learned from standing on the threshold of two groups. Isn't it true that a moment of disconnect from our closest friends can only be felt in between long periods of connection? Similarly, feeling disconnected from a group who we do not normally associate with might leave room for learning and insight. Perhaps it's in the small tensions and unique perspectives where we may grow close and learn from each other. Our liminality through the way we understand our appearance, our culture, and societal implications of our race may have given us a deeper perspective on our own multifaceted identity.

Though Scott, Ariana, Lily, and I shared common threads in our mixed race identity, our experiences and stories are different from one another. Though I chose to speak to mixed race individuals who lived in predominantly white communities and schools, we all were introduced to different understandings of race and culture. Some of us looked like minorities; some of us looked white. Two of us visited our family's country every year and two of us had never been. One of us decided to embrace her minority half in college while the rest of us shied away a bit. Though I focused on appearance, culture, and society as a developmental framework, I realize they can never be fully untangled. Even our unaware, unique, and liminal selves may intertwine with one another depending on where we find ourselves. These stories may begin to show the complexities of mixed race identity, leaving us with even more questions than when we began. Yet, these questions can only stem from a deeper understanding of the intricacies of our own lives and the lives of others.

### Conclusion

Through my journey of exploring my own memories as well as the memories and stories of others, my understanding of mixed race identity development has expanded and deepened. Following the area of narrative psychology, I recognize the power of hindsight (Freeman, 2009) and how I could gain new understandings of my identity in exploring my own past. By comparing my thoughts at the time of the experience to my present interpretations, I can see a development in my ways of thinking, my values, and my identity. I learned something about myself through a more mature, more insightful lens. As stories of my memories unfolded, I felt compelled to hear the intricate lives of other individuals of mixed race. Through interviewing for qualitative inquiry (Josselson, 2013), I explored the common threads and the distinctive qualities woven throughout the unique lives of three students in my class. Throughout my exploration of all of these narratives, along with some of the relevant psychological and sociological literature, I was able to capture a sense of how some people of mixed race backgrounds might develop their identities.

Exploring identity through appearance, culture, and society, I described overlapping selves that make up a complex and ever-changing identity apparent in some mixed race people. An unaware self, a unique self, and a liminal self were manifested in all three layers of identity. At early parts in our lives when we mainly thought of race through color, we were unaware that we looked different. Yet, once we gained that initial awareness, we wanted to embrace and even show off our unique features. We also felt a feeling of liminality when we realized that we looked not quite like the people around us and not quite like how we felt.

In the second layer of identity, when understanding race became tied to culture, we recognized that there were parts of our parent's culture that we were and potentially still are



unaware of. Yet, many of us had a desire to learn about those unique stories of our family's cultural histories. This contrast between not knowing ourselves and wanting to know who we are left us with a feeling of liminality, feeling in between two cultures.

The last layer of identity begins to explain why these feelings of liminality may be so salient, and why we often feel like we have to choose one racial identity. Identity through society delves into the cultural segregation of race, particularly on college campuses, where the need for identity is overwhelming. As we became aware of the separations of our two races, we struggled to embody the unique selves we had coming into college. Our experience of liminality seemed to be even more pressing in our lives. Though our identities seemed to head toward a state of question, we all seemed to have a generally positive understanding, an acceptance, and a sense of intrigue about our complex identities. Without explicitly sharing it, it seemed as though some of us saw our feeling of liminality as one that was unique in itself, special to people of mixed race. Our liminal self seemed to transform into an intellectual curiosity, an intrigue, a desire to know more about our own identities and histories.

## Epilogue

Through the journey of reflecting on my own memories, I have gained a heightened sense of self-awareness. As I look back on my past thoughts and decisions, I have found pieces of my deeper identity, which may still linger to this day. Through my self-awareness, I am more alive (May, 1953). With this lifelong yearning to understand my past and current identity, I am, in some ways, more free to both reveal and create who I am.

Towards the end of my sophomore year of college, I was walking with my new friend Jessie who grew up in the same area of Manila where my mother went to school. Jessie was born in the U.S., but lived in the Philippines for eight years. We had always been acquaintances, and we grew to be much closer over the course of the business program.

*As I walk with Jessie through the coffee shop, I see Jamil in the distance, a tall, wide-eyed, African-American boy who I have been acquaintances with for the past two years. Every time I see him, he wears clunky red headphones that are wrapped around his head and his fingers are curled up into a loose fist as he dances his way across campus. He tilts his neck up and partially closes his eyes while he walks to a beat.*

*“Hey Kelly! hey Jessie!” He excitedly shouts across the coffee shop. Jessie and I walk over to him, already smiling. I haven’t seen Jamil in a while, I think to myself. Then, I remember that he recently came back from studying abroad in the Philippines.*

*“Jamil! How was the Philippines? I saw that you were there for the summer and last semester!?” I have to allow myself to pause even though I want to ask him so many more questions.*

*Jessie, who is a little more timid, seems excited to hear about his trip as well. She stands next to me, smiling. We both look up at Jamil in anticipation. He explains how he worked for the*

*U.S. Embassy in the Philippines and had an incredible experience. He tells us how much he loved the people in the Philippines.*

*“I’m so jealous!,” I yell, smiling. “I’ve never been before, but I want to so badly.”*

*Jamil’s eyes widen even more and his head tilts back.*

*“Really!?,” he pauses soaking in what I had said. “You would love it there! Your personality would fit right in the Philippines. Don’t you think Jessie?” He asks Jessie who would know even better than he would. I’ve never heard someone tell me this before and I look to Jessie to try to read her thoughts. She nods her head and chuckles a bit. She seems to completely agree with Jamil. They look at each other as if they are speaking a language I cannot understand. I feel like there is this interesting secret and I am dying to know. I want to understand how they both see this part of my personality that is “Filipino.” Yet, Jamil reminds me that once I go visit the country, I will know, and before I know it, Jessie and I have to leave to head out for the rest of our business program.*

When Jamil told me that I seemed Filipino, I wanted to pinpoint exactly what he had meant. It made me think that perhaps I learned more from my mother than I had realized. Maybe I am more of my mother’s daughter than I had once thought. Even to this day, I cannot put into words how my character or my personality truly reflects my Filipino background. I still don’t know what Jamil meant by his words, and I can only make guesses as to how my mother and her values have affected my life. I can only compare myself with the few Filipinos I have come to know. Even though it saddens me to say that I still struggle to articulate how I identify with my mother’s world, it comforts me knowing that other people around me may see it. It reminds me that it is not just me who paints my identity, but it is also the people in my life who shape the way I see myself.

I certainly took in what Jamil had said, internalizing his depiction of me as a half-Filipino. In a way, I trusted him, believing that he may see me in a different light than how my white friends see me. Maybe it's not that I act differently around different races, but that my minority friends and my white friends draw out distinct sides of me, sides which may contradict one another, but nonetheless are all a part of me.

This experience of being called Filipino for something beyond my appearance or my ethnicity made me feel unique. I felt unique in that something about my deeper character represented my mother's life. Not only compared to my friends, but even compared to my typical self, I felt special. At the same time, though, I was unaware of how this uniqueness truly came to be. I was, once again, in a state of liminality, a state that allowed me to seek my identity more deeply. Even after all of these experiences, my liminal self, along with my unaware and unique selves, have always been a part of me. Whether they emerge within individual moments or they linger throughout larger phases in my life, the plurality of these selves remains a distinct facet of my identity. At times, I find myself unaware of my mixed race background. Other times, it seems to be at the core of how I see the world. But, for the most part, I feel in between the two races that have made me who I am. It is also possible that these selves intertwine with one another just as they did during my conversation with Jamil. The conversation, which made me think and made me question, once again, "who am I?"

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