

“ARE YOU WHITE?” RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN BIRACIAL WHITE-  
ASIAN WOMEN FROM THE UNITED STATES

by

Katherine L. Johnson  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts  
Interdisciplinary Studies

Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_

Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_

Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Spring Semester 2019  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

“Are You White?” Racial Identity Formation in Biracial white-Asian Women from the  
United States

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

by

Katherine L. Johnson  
Bachelor of Science  
Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Director: Angela Hattery, Professor  
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Spring Semester 2019  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2019 Katherine L. Johnson  
All Rights Reserved

## **DEDICATION**

To my life partner, Brian. Thank you for believing in me and believing I can do anything. Your love, support, and patience provides me with the courage to grow and challenge myself. I love you always. Cheers to our next chapter.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to my family and friends for your love and support, especially over the last three years of this program. Mom and dad, thank you for helping me become the person I am today. Lucy, Scout, and Argyle, thank you for being the best homework companions. A sincere thank you to Dr. Angela Hattery for serving as my chair, and for inspiring and encouraging me through this process. I'm so grateful our paths crossed at Mason. Thank you for changing my life. Thank you Dr. Rachel Lewis and Dr. Shannon Davis for serving on my committee, providing feedback and edits, and sharing a feminist lens for research. Thank you to Dr. Julie Owen for showing me that research can be fun, unique, and unconventional. Thank you Dr. Graziella McCarron for seeing my potential and encouraging me to fulfill it. I'm so appreciative for all the women academicians, mentors, and role models I've met at Mason. Thank you Eleanor Weis and the School of Business Dream Team for wholeheartedly supporting my goals. I'm so grateful to have been part of this team with such a fantastic group of people. Finally, thank you to all the women who participated in my research. This thesis wouldn't have been possible without all of you and your willingness to share your experiences as white-Asian women moving through the world. I've learned so much over the course of this project, and I'm grateful to each of you for supporting this research and trusting me to share some of your most personal experiences and views. Thank you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables .....	vii
List of Figures .....	viii
Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People .....	ix
Abstract .....	x
Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Background .....	2
Problem Statement .....	3
Significance .....	4
Purpose .....	4
Key Terms .....	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review .....	8
Anti-miscegenation and Immigration Laws .....	9
Forming a Biracial Identity .....	15
Factors that Influence Racial Identity of White-Asians .....	17
Gender .....	18
Internalized Racism and Oppression .....	20
Critical Race Theory .....	23
Chapter Three: Methodology .....	28
Positionality .....	28
Participants .....	29
Data Collection .....	30
Analysis .....	31
Participant Backgrounds .....	32
Chapter Four: Interview Findings .....	33
Discussion (or not) of Racial Identity as a Child .....	33
On the Cusp of a Culture .....	35

What Are You?.....	37
Bullying and Self-esteem .....	39
The Importance of Appearance .....	41
White Passing and Racial Identity Evolution.....	43
Women of Color? .....	46
Chapter Five: Photo Findings .....	49
Who Are You? .....	49
Hapa or Hafu .....	49
I Can't Fit in Anywhere .....	54
Not Half, but Whole.....	60
Beyond Race .....	64
Language Patterns .....	68
Chapter Six: Discussion.....	70
Limiting the Study Population .....	70
Including a Visual Representation .....	71
Choosing an Identity: White, Asian, or White-Asian?.....	73
Implications of the Model Minority Myth on Racial Identity.....	75
Limitations .....	76
Implications for Further Research.....	78
Conclusion.....	79
Appendix A.....	82
Appendix B .....	84
Appendix C .....	86
References.....	87

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1: Interview Participant Demographics .....	32



**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure	Page
Figure 1 .....	51
Figure 2 .....	53
Figure 3 .....	55
Figure 4 .....	57
Figure 5 .....	59
Figure 6 .....	61
Figure 7 .....	63
Figure 8 .....	65
Figure 9 .....	67
Figure 10 .....	72

## **BILL OF RIGHTS FOR RACIALLY MIXED PEOPLE**

**By Maria P.P. Root**

### **I HAVE THE RIGHT...**

Not to justify my existence in this world.  
Not to keep the races separate within me.  
Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity.  
Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.

### **I HAVE THE RIGHT...**

To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.  
To identify myself differently from how my parents identify me.  
To identify myself differently from my brothers and sisters.  
To identify myself differently in different situations.

### **I HAVE THE RIGHT...**

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial.  
To change my identity over my lifetime -- and more than once.  
To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.  
To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **“ARE YOU WHITE?” RACIAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN BIRACIAL WHITE-ASIAN WOMEN FROM THE UNITED STATES**

Katherine L. Johnson, 2019

George Mason University, 2019

Thesis Director: Dr. Angela Hattery

The study focused on biracial white-Asian women from the U.S. and their understanding of how they fit in the country's racial order. Interviews were conducted with six women to explore what factors most influence their racial identity, how they personally identify and how that identity has been interpreted by others, experiences of internal conflicts related to their racial identity, and if they identify as women of color. Photos and handwritten responses to the question “Who are you?” were also submitted by the same population in order to understand how biracial white-Asian women view themselves and their various identities. The participants' responses provide a greater understanding of what it is like living with both privileged and marginalized identities, and how racial categorization in the U.S. typically ignores those of mixed race heritage if they are white passing. The findings can further inform our understanding of race in the U.S. as

something that exists outside of a binary, but instead on a spectrum, and how racial identity is policed and by whom.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“So rather than an innocent question to someone who is multiracial, ‘What are you?’ becomes an accusation of violating the racial truth regime. The quotidian enactment of race and the policing of racial boundaries constitute an exercise in power.” - Mary Bernstein, Marcie De la Cruz, 2009*

“Are you white?” I distinctly remember being asked this question by a white classmate in middle school, which she not so conveniently posed during a practice fire drill, of all times. I also remember defensively responding that yes, I am white. Although at the time, as someone maybe in their early teens, I did not understand my urgency and defensiveness to answer that I am white and to exclude the fact that I am also Asian, quarter Japanese to be exact. However, as an adult studying racial justice, I can look back and see how my classmate’s question, while possibly unintentional, was an act of racial policing. To many, “what are you?” may seem to be an innocent question, as Bernstein and De la Cruz state (2009). To those who are mixed race, “what are you?” is a loaded question that could require several different answers. These answers might even change throughout the lifespan of a biracial individual.

Fast forward to 2018, more than 10 years later, and I still encounter questions similar to this. While presenting preliminary findings for this research at a poster presentation, I had an older white woman ask if I was born in the U.S. and how my dad met my mom, assuming that my dad is white and mom is Asian. When discussing the

Model Minority Myth, she also stated that she was surprised to know that Asians have problems. Like others who are biracial, particularly white-Asian women, we are not strangers to assumptions and questions like this. If anything, our experiences prove that there is still much to learn about being mixed race in the U.S., and why our society is so concerned with policing race and Whiteness.

## **Background**

It is estimated that by 2050, 1-in-5 Americans will be multiracial (Davenport, 2016). This staggering growth of multiracial people means that for the first time, the minority will be the majority, and the “face of America will no longer be White,” (Collins, 2000, p. 131). Since the 1970s, multiracial births have increased by 260%, and in 2012, nearly 3% of the U.S. population identified themselves as multiracial (Chong & Kuo, 2015). This growth can be attributed to two factors, including the decriminalization of interracial marriage in 1967, which led to the mixed-race population being the fastest growing. In addition, the right to claim biracial or multiracial labels emerged (Townsend, 2012). The right to claim multiple races has only been available since a 2000 change on the U.S. Census, allowing a person to select more than one race (Davenport, 2016).

While this change in demographics will impact how the U.S. views race and minority classifications, there is still little research on biracialism. Most previous studies on biracialism have examined the racial identity of black-white individuals (Wilton, Sanchez & Garcia, 2013). However, the Asian-white population is growing at the fastest rate ever, but “presently research on Asian-White biracial identity is very scarce” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 203). In fact, between the years 2000 and 2010, “the Asian-White population in

the U.S. increased by 87% to 1.6 million individuals, the highest total in history” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 203). This lack of knowledge on how Asian-white individuals navigate their race and view themselves is a gap in the research. Furthermore, how Asian-white women identify and navigate their race is different from how Asian-white men may identify, because “biracial women may have an easier time blurring and crossing racial boundaries” (Davenport, 2016, p. 62). Several factors influence this blurring of racial boundaries. Women who are racially ambiguous are less likely to be perceived as minorities when compared to men, meaning the genders are “racialized in systemically distinct ways” (Davenport, 2016, p. 62). In addition, physical attractiveness, including European features and lighter skin, is an important social resource that women are judged more harshly for than men (Davenport, 2016). When combined, these two factors make it easier for biracial women, particularly those who are white-Asian, to blur racial boundaries and defy categorization.

### **Problem Statement**

Previous research on biracialism among white-Asians has shown that more people are identifying as white and Asian, due to the change on the U.S. census that allows an individual to check more than one race box when self-identifying. However, when asked to select just one race, white-Asian respondents are more likely to select white (Gullickson, Morning, 2011). Research has shown that how one racially identifies could be dependent upon factors like gender, social circle, and how a parent identifies (Davenport, 2016). In addition to those factors there is space to evaluate how white-Asian

women racially identify based on Critical Race Theory concepts like the Model Minority stereotype, white passing, and the Black-White Binary.

### **Significance**

Research on the racial identity of white-Asian women is significant for several reasons. First, the racial identities of Asians are seldom examined in Critical Race Theory, with exception to the Model Minority Myth. The lack of representation of Asians in these discussions has further reinforced the black-white binary, leaving Asians the closest to whiteness, yet still the Model Minority. In addition to these problems, there is not a space for white-Asians to discuss or reflect upon how biracialism affects them, leading to possible identity questions or internal conflict about how to interpret or understand their own race. While the target population of this research is most affected by this lack of discussion or acknowledgment of racial differences, it also has a negative effect on discussions of race relations in general, due to ignoring the impact of whiteness and white supremacy across all races.

### **Purpose**

This thesis aims to address how biracial white-Asian women form their racial identity through interviews with biracial white-Asian women in order to determine which factors most influence their identity and how whiteness affects that identity. The goal of the research is to learn whether being biracial influences if and/or how white-Asian women identity as women of color, and where they see themselves fitting in the larger racial construct in the United States. The purpose of this thesis is to help increase awareness of and apply a theoretical framework for understanding the unique challenges



faced by biracial women in navigating their racial identity in a society where whiteness is valued and displayed as the norm. In focusing on white-Asian women as the target population, a population that holds privileged and marginalized identities, the purpose is to identify factors that influence their racial identity and labeling decisions. This is important because biracialism, particularly for white-Asians, is seldom discussed. This lack of focus on biracialism has failed to help those who are biracial understand their race, and how their racial identity is affected by a white supremacist society. In addition, white-Asian women may face unique challenges in navigating their racial identity due to the Model Minority stereotype and Black-White Binary discussed by Critical Race scholars.

In the second chapter, the Literature Review, I will discuss anti-miscegenation and immigration laws, how one forms a biracial identity, the factors that most influence the racial identity of white-Asians, internalized racism and oppression, and apply a Critical Race Theory framework to the identity formation of white-Asian women. This framework will primarily focus on the Model Minority Myth and the Black-White Binary. This either/or option leaves no space for those who identify as something other than black or white to explore or understand their racial identity, leading to confusion both internally and externally in a society that sees race as just black or white.

The third chapter, Methodology, will situate my positionality as a researcher. Like the population of this study, I identify as a white-Asian woman from the U.S. I explain how the participants were recruited for both the interview and photo portions, and

provide demographic information on the interview participants. I provide information on the data collection process and my analysis of that data.

Chapter four presents my interview findings with the six participants, and I examine common themes from each interview. These themes include a lack of discussion surrounding race as children, feeling as if they do not fully belong to their Asian culture, others questioning their racial identity, issues of bullying and low self-esteem, a focus on physical appearance, white passing and racial identity evolution, and whether the participants view themselves as women of color or not.

Chapter five introduces a new group of women, those who opted to participate in the photo portion. For this portion of the research, the same population was asked to submit a selfie and handwritten response to the question “who are you?” This is in stark contrast to the question they usually receive about their racial identity, “what are you?” The women featured in the photos use various labels to describe their racial identity, including hapa, hafu, woman of color, half, other, and whole. They also describe themselves in relation to others, as moms and daughters, and include their hobbies and personal and professional goals. Common themes discussed in this chapter include participants feeling that they fit in nowhere, or alternatively, embracing their biracial identity, looking beyond race to describe the other identities they inhabit, and common language used in responses to the question “who are you?”

In the final chapter, Discussion, I recap the importance of including both interview and photo findings and why the sample was limited to white-Asian women. I highlight how this group provides new insight to navigating a biracial identity when one

holds both privileged and marginalized identities. I situate this in existing Critical Race Theory scholarship, explaining how both the Model Minority Myth and Black-White Binary influence the racial identity of white-Asian women. I then offer suggestions for further research in this area and discuss limitations of this study. It is my hope that this work will contribute to the conversation about mixed race identity in the U.S., and how these identities are often policed through the racial binary, both at the interactional and institutional levels.

### **Key Terms**

It is important to note that throughout the thesis, several terms will be used to describe the white-Asian population. These terms include biracial, multiracial, and mixed race. Although various terms may be used, the target population will always remain the same. For the purposes of this thesis, the target population will include adult women, aged 18 and above, who identify as both white and Asian. Several of the photo participants also use hapa or hafu to identify themselves as biracial white-Asian people. These terms will be explained in the photo findings chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will begin with the history of policing interracial couples and marriage in the U.S. in order to preserve the category of whiteness. This overview will examine laws against interracial marriage, immigration laws intended to preserve “American genetic stock,” the legalization of interracial marriage, and the common couplings of whites and Asians (Curington, 2016, p. 33). This section is meant to set the ground of understanding for how biracial individuals have been viewed as a threat to Whiteness, treated as others, and stigmatized in the United States. Next, information on how a biracial identity is developed and the emotional and psychological benefits to claiming a biracial identity will be discussed. Factors that influence how Asian-white people identify racially will also be investigated, including family, social class, religion, and gender. Particular attention will be given to how Asian-white women view their race and its implications. Next, I will assess the influence of whiteness on an Asian-white woman’s identity, and how the pressures to assimilate or identify more closely with whiteness influences her labeling decisions. The final section will review Critical Race Theories, which will be applied to assess how whiteness impacts an Asian-white woman’s view of her race. These theories will include the Model Minority Myth, white passing, and the Black-White Binary.

## **Anti-miscegenation and Immigration Laws**

In order to protect Whiteness “in an era when the quantity of racial blood was the measure of one’s identity,” miscegenation laws existed in the U.S. through the late 1960s (Curington, 2016, p. 32). These laws criminalized interracial sex, relationships, and marriages between whites and non-whites. These anti- miscegenation laws originated to prevent the couplings of whites and blacks, but extended to include other groups such as Native Americans and Asian Americans. In fact, 14 states prohibited marriage between whites and Asians (Curington, 2016). Alternatively, “the state had less interest in regulating sex between different ethnic and racial minorities groups” (Curington, 2016, p. 32). It was determined that one’s racial identity would be categorized “through women’s bodies and reproductive capacities,” but in some cases “class membership and racial identity were...determined by matriarchal blood for some and not for others” (Curington, 2016, p. 33). This designation was based largely on property rights, and the state aimed to reduce the number of mixed children born to white mothers “whose legal identities could potentially threaten the stability of property and propriety” (Curington, 2016, p. 33). Likewise, determining race through the mother meant that enslaved women who were raped by slave owners would give birth to mixed-race children who were also enslaved. This ruling in racial identity very clearly marked the differences between those who were free and those who were enslaved, as “slavery was an institution fueled by economic exploitation, racism, and patriarchy” (Curington, 2016, p. 32). This domination and exploitation extended to enslaved mixed-race women, because “they, too, were susceptible to rape, due to White men’s sexual attraction toward them” (Curington, 2016,

p. 32). These mixed-race women, called mulattas, were viewed as exotic by white men prior to the start of the Civil War. This exoticization “existed within a definite set of power relations. In other words, the space that aristocratic White men had in determining the sexual attractiveness of mulatta women operated under the continued racist assumption that Whiteness was beautiful yet Blackness was accessible and hypersexual” (Curington, 2016, p. 32). This desire of sexual attractiveness towards the “other” can also be applied to white-Asian women. Because white-Asian women both possess characteristics of Whiteness and Asianness, it can be assumed that similarly to the early experiences of mulatta women, they are viewed as beautiful, yet exotic others who are also hypersexualized.

According to Curington (2016), during the mid-1800s and early-1900s, the “presence of Asians in the United States aroused fears of their alleged deviant and lawless sexuality that would contaminate the so-called American genetic stock” (p. 33). To maintain the purity of the white race, Asians were discriminated against and targeted by immigration laws. The hypersexualizing of Asian women can be seen in the anti-immigration laws that targeted them, especially in 1875 when the federal government started to play a larger role in immigration control (Luibhéid, 2002). The Page Law of 1875 banned Asian women being brought to the U.S. for “lewd and immoral purposes” (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 2). This law was not a matter of protecting Asian prostitutes, but was a response to “fears that they threatened white heteropatriarchy” (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 5). It is also important to note that “women of other nationalities were significantly involved in prostitution work,” but they were not targeted by the law (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 31). This

shows that the “sexual monitoring of immigrants intersects with other systems of social hierarchy,” explaining the targeting of Asian women (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 31). The Page Law made family reunification difficult, especially for the Chinese, because “the law’s provisions to exclude Asian prostitutes were so vigorously enforced that all Chinese women experienced great difficulty gaining admission” (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 6). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 “restricted the rights and activities of Chinese immigrant women who were coded as ‘undesirable’ and ‘prostitutes’ and then later broadened to include virtually all subsequent immigrants from Asia” (Curington, 2016, p. 33). Under the exclusion act, only a select group of Chinese immigrants were allowed in the U.S., including students, teachers, and merchants (Luibhéid, 2002). The Chinese Exclusion Act made family reunification even more difficult for the wives of Chinese men already in the U.S. (Luibhéid, 2002). The immigration developments between 1875 and 1890 accomplished three things, which included laying the groundwork for complete federal control of immigration in 1891, establishing selective immigration as a federal policy, and regulating women’s sexuality (Luibhéid, 2002). Asian women attempting to immigrate were largely excluded if they were not in a heterosexual marriage with children. The Contract Labor Law attempted to reunite families who did not immigrate at the same time, but Luibhéid (2002) argues that this “produced an exclusionary sexual order that was integrally tied to gender, race, and class inequalities” (p. 3).

Moving into the 1900’s, Asian men were also targeted by anti-miscegenation and immigration laws. The Expatriation Act of 1907 stated that any white woman who married an Asian man would lose her citizenship status (Curington, 2016). Again, this

law intertwined with the belief that children take their mother's racial identity, meaning that biracial white-Asian children would be viewed as white, threatening property rights and the purity of Whiteness. This also reinforced the state's disinterest in "inhibiting a growth of mulatto children from mothers of color" (Curington, 2016, p. 33). By 1920, Japan signed the Ladies Agreement, which ended the immigration of Japanese brides, because the U.S. feared "their childbearing threatened to bring about a Japanese conquest" (Luibhéid, 2002, p. 16). Under the Immigration Act of 1924, 85% of immigration slots were reserved for those from Northern and Western Europe. This means that the immigration of all Asians, except Filipinos under U.S. rule, was ended (Luibhéid, 2002). After World War II, immigration laws changed in the U.S. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 (Luibhéid, 2002). In 1945 an amendment was made to the War Brides Act that "allowed members of the armed forces to bring Asian spouses to the United States" (Curington, 2016, p. 35). This seems to be a peculiar change in acceptance of Asians, especially at a time of high anti-Japanese sentiment and a history of discrimination against the Chinese. There were still barriers though, as the "system was designed to make marriage difficult to accomplish, and easy for the young man to change his mind" (Tolbert, 2016). By 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act "removed the legal obstacles, although paperwork was still considerable" (Tolbert, 2016). It is estimated that 45,000 women came to the U.S. as war brides (Tolbert, 2016). Countless numbers of these women felt pressured to assimilate and "give up their Japanese identities to become more fully American" (Tolbert, 2016).



Interracial marriage was eventually legalized in the U.S. in 1967, based on the Supreme Court's ruling in *Loving vs. Virginia*, and increases in interracial marriage were found starting in the 1970s (Qian and Lichter, 2011). Today, interracial marriages are viewed as "an indicator of improving race relations in America" (Qian and Lichter, 2011, p. 1065), simply because people of different racial backgrounds are entering into marriages and having children. Furthermore, multiracial people are often depicted as post-racial in media. In particular, multiracial women are viewed as "young, upwardly mobile, light, single, and attractive," showing the gendered experience of being both a woman and multiracial (Curington, 2016, p. 38). In reality though, interracial marriages are still rare in America. Based on data from 2000, only 6% of U.S. marriages were interracial (Qian and Lichter, 2011). Although interracial marriage is rare, data shows that "Asians intermarry almost exclusively with whites" (Fryer, 2007, p. 72). More specifically, white male and Asian females couples are "the most common interracial marriage" coupling today (Fryer, 2007, p. 85). From a sociological perspective, interracial marriage can best be explained through the social exchange theory (Fryer, 2007). In short, the theory states that because whites are at the top of the status hierarchy, marrying someone of another race usually comes at a social cost. Because of this, they look for their partner to have some superior traits, whether that is based on physical attractiveness or personality. Fryer (2007) summarizes interracial marriage through this theory by stating:

For whites, given they are believed to be on top of the social hierarchy, interracial marriage will always come at a social cost, though interracial marriage with

whites is a benefit to other groups. In equilibrium, then, whites must be compensated for their higher social status by intermarrying with racial minorities who possess more redeeming qualities. In minority–white marriages, the minorities will have superior objective characteristics—like being more attractive or intelligent—than their white mates. Thus, the social exchange model refers to a trade between objective characteristics and social status. (p. 85)

This theory takes into account changes in interracial marriage patterns over the years. For example, “intermarriage has shifted from being primarily a phenomenon of the less-educated to being primarily a phenomenon of the more-educated” (Fryer, 2007, p. 82).

Based on these couplings and children they produce, data shows that it is becoming increasingly difficult for a biracial individual to claim their identity. This is particularly true for the children of Asian-white unions, where “racial assimilation through marriage (‘whitening’) is significantly more likely” when compared to the children of Latino-white or black-white marriages (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, p. 940).

Research shows that “whereas only 22 percent of the children of black fathers and white mothers are classified as white, the children of similar unions among Asians are twice as likely to be classified as white” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, p. 940). Thus, white-Asian biracial individuals are “much more likely to identify as White” than in comparison to black-white individuals, and white-Asian individuals are “more likely to classify themselves as white” than as Asian (Qian and Lichter, 2011, p. 1068). This is likely due to experiences of white passing and how others interpret their race based on phenotype for those who are

white-Asian. The factors that most influence how a biracial person chooses to identify, such as family, friends, gender, and socioeconomic status, will also be discussed.

### **Forming a Biracial Identity**

In a country fixated with clear cut labeling and identifying oneself as belonging to a race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, political party, and numerous other categories, it is clear that biracial individuals face challenges when labeling their racial identity. This in part is due to the United States' history of racism and discrimination against minority groups. Chong and Kuo (2015) explain that “against the backdrop of racial stratification, discrimination, and racism in North America, the racial identity development process for ethnic minorities can be complicated. This is especially true for biracial individuals, who straddle age-old racial divides and challenge the very meaning of race” (p. 203). While it is challenging for biracial individuals to process and label their racial identity throughout their life, it is imperative they have the ability to identify as biracial, because denial of this right is “associated with lower self-esteem and decreased motivational outcomes” (Townsend, 2012, p. 91).

Two models explaining the development of a biracial identity have been used in past studies. George Kitahara Kich developed a three-stage approach that “theorized that a biracial individual strives for a totalness, a sense of wholeness that is more than the sum of its parts of that person's heritages” (Collins, 2000, p. 118). The first stage includes an initial awareness of one's racial difference and a “dissonance between self-perception and others' perception of them” (Collins, 2000, p. 117 ). The next stage is struggle of acceptance from others, and finally acceptance of the self as a biracial person (Collins,

2000). More recently in 2000, Walker S. Carlos Poston developed a five-stage approach to biracial identity formation. Poston explains that racial identity formation is important, because it informs a person's attitudes about an individual, others in their own racial/ethnic group, attitudes about others from minority groups, and attitudes about the majority. This development also dispels the cultural conformity myth, a belief that "all individuals from a particular minority group are the same" (Poston, 1990, p. 152). The first stage in Poston's approach is about personal identity, when one has not yet developed group self-esteem. Next, individuals choose a group with whom they will identify. Poston (1990) notes that "individuals are pushed to choose, and this choice is related to things such as ethnic background, home neighborhood, social support, and personal factors" (p. 153). Stage three is enmeshment and denial, which involves confusion and guilt about the group one chooses to identify with. In stage four, the person learns to appreciate being multiracial and aims to learn more about themselves. Lastly, individuals learn to cherish every part of their identity in stage five (Collins, 2000).

However, among Asian-white individuals, one race is typically dominant when it comes to identification. In other words, "biracial individuals often have a primary biracial identity orientation with which they identify more strongly and more often" (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 204). In an assessment of results from the M-HAPA survey (Multiracial Heritage Awareness and Personal Affiliation), which is given to teens entering college, three dominant racial groups emerged in relation to Asian-whites. Those groups are Asian-white integrated, white dominant, and Asian dominant. Those with an integrated identity had low scores on the marginal identity scale, which "suggested an overall sense

of belonging and social connectedness” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 209). This connectedness is attributed to their identification with both of their parents’ racial/ethnic backgrounds. The white dominant group most closely identified with their white parent’s heritage. This identification led to greater feelings of alienation from both their white and Asian heritages in comparison with the integrated and Asian dominant group (Chong & Kuo, 2015). The Asian dominant group identified most closely with their Asian parent’s heritage, but scored higher on marginal identity when compared with the other two groups, meaning a sense of disconnectedness from both heritages (Chong & Kuo, 2015). Implications for these identities, particularly of those who most closely identify as white dominant, will be discussed later in the chapter.

### **Factors that Influence Racial Identity of White-Asians**

It is often said that race is a socially constructed category, but little is known about the other identities that influence racial identity, Davenport (2016) says. In other words, the meanings individuals attach to their race are at the “intersection with other social categories,” like gender, social class, and religion (Davenport, 2016, p. 57). In her 2016 article, Davenport explores these other identities that influence the racial labeling decisions of biracial people. She argues that “biracials negotiate their identifications based on interpersonal encounters, neighborhoods, and places of worship, classifying themselves in relation to their peers and adopting the label deemed most acceptable in a given context” (Davenport, 2016, p. 58). I will give a brief overview of her findings for other categories, like social class, but will focus primarily on gender since my research focuses on racial identity formation in biracial white/Asian women. From Davenport’s

(2016) assessment, “money whitens,” meaning that higher levels of household and median neighborhood income ““whitens’ racial self-identification” (p. 59). This is especially true of Asian American families, which associate whiteness with “mainstream success and privilege, and thus turns to whites as a model for status attainment” (Davenport, 2016, p. 76). However, as will be discussed later in the Critical Race theory section, their model minority status “distinguishes them as a racial other —increasing the salience of the disadvantages tied to being non-white” (Davenport, 2016, p. 76). In addition, biracial people who speak another language besides English or are members of a religion tied to an ethnicity, are often more likely to identify as a minority (Davenport, 2016).

### ***Gender***

Davenport (2016) focuses most of her attention on gender, examining how an individual’s gender and their parents’ corresponding gender and race influence racial labeling decisions. As expected, family members and peers have the most influence on one’s racial labeling decisions. This is true to the extent that the presence of family and friends “influences the momentary self-identification of biracials” (Davenport, 2016, p. 60). From birth, biracial children are influenced in their labeling decisions based on which parent identifies as a minority.

For example, families in which the minority spouse is male are more likely to label their children minorities. For Asian-white families, this in part is due to the father’s surname, which has a “powerful symbolic indicator of ethnic heritage” (Davenport, 2016, p. 63). However, Asian-whites are more likely to identify with their mother’s race.

Davenport (2016) explains that “relative to Asian-white biracials who have an Asian mother, those with a white mother are 3.1 percent more likely to identify as white and less likely to identify as Asian” (p. 66). Biracial children of divorced or never married parents are also more likely to identify with their mother’s race. Furthermore, if a biracial child has a biracial parent, this decreases the likelihood that they will identify as biracial when compared to children of two different single race parents (Davenport, 2016). Because biracial children “engage in a sort of racial acculturation,” they will often choose racial labels based on the norms or expectations of majority populations (Davenport, 2016, p. 60). In turn, this can lead to years spent “grappling with their identities, incorporating or rejecting labels based on their interactions and the settings in which they are socialized” (Davenport, 2016, p. 60).

In addition to how their parents identify racially, men and women are influenced by their own genders when it comes to how they self-label. When all other factors are the same, “biracial women are much more likely than biracial men to identify as multiracial” (Davenport, 2016, p. 58). Davenport (2016) explains that racial boundaries are not as fluid for men when compared with women. One explanation for this difference is the “gendered nature of racism in the United States” (Davenport, 2016, p. 61). Compared with women, who are less likely to be perceived as a racial minority, men of color are prone to experiencing “discrimination, witnessing displays of fear from whites, and being unfairly treated by the police because of their race” (Davenport, 2016, p. 61). According to Davenport (2016), the racial classification of men and women is also different due to the value placed on women’s appearance. She goes on to say, “physical attractiveness is a

more important social resource for women than for men, and skin tone is a crucial trait in the evaluation of attractiveness. Studies show that East Asian cultures venerate Eurocentric features as reflecting high status for women” (Davenport, 2016, p. 62). They may also be viewed as “exotic ethnic ‘others’ and internalize this perception of difference (Davenport, 2016, p. 74). Because biracial women may have “Eurocentric features,” or experience colorism, they “have an easier time blurring and crossing racial boundaries” (Davenport, 2016, p. 62). Research shows that it is more “socially acceptable for women to live in multiple racial cultures simultaneously,” explaining the ease with which biracial women experience blurring racial boundaries (Davenport, 2016, p. 72). However, the role of whiteness must be examined when looking at how and when biracial women decide to identify as biracial, or if they identify more closely with one race. It is clear that whiteness plays a role in how these women are viewed in society, based upon the value placed upon their features and appearance, and that biracial women can even internalize these views. However, current research does not explore how this affects biracial women’s view of themselves, their self-esteem, and potentially internalized racism.

### **Internalized Racism and Oppression**

Research shows that biracial white-Asian women can struggle with navigating their racial identity, feeling as if they identify with one race more than the other, and even at times experience internal racism as a result of their minority identity. Gullickson and Morning (2011) find that those with partial Asian ancestry are less likely to be subjected to a one-drop rule. The one-drop rule was first coined as a way to classify biracial white-black people. According to the “rule,” an individual “with any known African ancestry



has traditionally been classified, both socially and officially, as black” (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 499). The one-drop rule follows the “logic of hypodescent,” which assigns someone to the lower status of their ancestral groups (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 499). Because white-Asians are less likely to have the one-drop rule applied to them, they are more fluid in their racial identity labels, and less likely to “claim Asian ancestry alone than part-black individuals” when self-classifying (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 500). However, this does not mean that they are not identifying as Asian. The authors also found that when compared with other biracial groups in the U.S., who prefer selecting a single race, “part-Asian individuals favor marking more than one race” (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 506). The authors attribute this self-classification decision of multiracial Asians to what they describe as a more progressive period of U.S. history in race relations and immigration in which “not enough time has passed for rigid racial-assignment rules to have formed for these groups since Asian ancestry typically implies a generationally recent immigration to the United States” (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 506). This assessment is based on the finding that 73% of Asian Americans were first or second generation (Gullickson & Morning, 2011). However, like other racial minority groups in the United States, this could be a “temporary stage in a process toward an eventual hyper- or hypodescent regime” for multiracial Asians (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 506).

With those findings in mind, it raises the question of how whiteness impacts the identity of biracial white-Asian women, particularly when they are accepted or pass as white in the U.S. As previously mentioned, Davenport (2016) found some white-Asian

women have internalized the “exotic” otherness of their racial identity. Chong and Kuo (2015) explained that internalized oppression “involves the individual holding ‘Whiteness’ in high regard while feeling ashamed of his or her minority heritage” (p. 204). In his biracial identity development model, Poston also touches on the notion of internalized oppression in his enmeshment/denial stage, which involves “self-hatred and embarrassment about one parent, who is usually the minority parent” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 205). Naturally if value is placed on Whiteness, biracial people may over-identify with their white heritage in order to gain approval from the “hierarchically superior group” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 210). This fluidity of self-labeling and the value placed upon Whiteness is further enforced by the fact that when compared with black-white people, Asian-whites have “less consistent racial identities between the home and school settings” (Chong & Kuo, 2015, p. 204). In fact, multiracial people are “four times more likely to change their identity than to keep a consistent racial identity, meaning that a person who identifies as biracial Asian/white today will likely self-categorize as Asian or white at a later date” (Wilton, Sanchez & Garcia, 2013, p. 42). The social context of a situation is highly influential when it comes to self-labeling, because in addition to how they view themselves, “the way in which other people perceive and categorize them” also influences their racial identity. In her article, Collins (2000) points to the “what are you?” questions biracial people experience when it comes to their racial identity as an outside force that makes the biracial individual “question their self-definition” (p. 127). She elaborates by stating:

Physical features become a constant reminder of their differentness and may not only serve as a physical descriptor, but are often generalized to define the whole person. Because people take others into account in the process of social comparison, they use others' responses and beliefs as a basis of judging themselves and others. This confronts the individual with a challenge to the existent self-definition. (Collins, 2000, p. 127)

The emphasis placed upon Whiteness and women's experiences of having their race questioned will be a primary focus of my study. The fluidity of self-labeling, influence of social context, and Whiteness are important concepts in understanding connections to Critical Race Theory in the final section of this literature review.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Biracial white-Asian women experience the paradox of being both a member of the Model Minority and the privilege of being white. Based on these two identities coexisting, biracial white-Asian women are viewed as closest to Whiteness, when compared with other racial identities, and even accepted as fully white in many social contexts if they pass. The Model Minority stereotype, white passing, and enforcement of a Black-White Binary make this possible for white-Asian women. The Model Minority stereotype has existed since the mid-1960s, coined during the Civil Rights Movement, and characterizes Asians as having a strong work ethic and intelligence (Kiang et al., 2017). Asians have a history of experiencing nativism and being othered in the U.S., but with the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, Asian immigrants were in high demand to fill skilled professions (Kiang et al., 2017). This decision re-enforced anti-blackness

and the Model Minority stereotype simultaneously, because “if Asian Americans could be cast as models of success, then the whole idea of inequality could be upended and other racial minorities could be dismissed as complaining and disruptive” (Kiang et al., 2017, p. 3). In fact, it is believed that the success of Asian Americans was played up by the media in an attempt to create a divide between Asians and African Americans. Through the lens of Whiteness, the success of Asians in achieving the American Dream legitimized American values like hard work, perseverance, and responsibility. This framing was “a ruling class endeavor to disunite African Americans and Asian Americans during the Civil Rights Movement and has continued to serve as a convenient tool to manipulate racial perceptions, justifying existing racial hierarchy and holding individuals against the model minority standard” (Chao et al., 2013, p. 86).

This pervasive stereotype remains harmful for all people of color, not only Asians. Asians may be viewed as “honorary whites,” but the Model Minority stereotype keeps them “confined by its trappings that can perpetuate racial tensions and reinforce racial stratification” (Kiang et al., 2017, p. 3). Because the Model Minority stereotype projects whiteness onto Asian Americans, they are not fairly recognized as a distinct racial group, and at the same time are not afforded all of the aspects of white privilege. For example, Asian Americans are excluded as a protected minority under federal affirmative action policies. This decision could in part be due to the model minority myth, classifying Asians within whiteness and erasing their racial identity, because they are not deserving of affirmative action in comparison with other people of color. Biracial individuals also struggle to be accepted by others of the same race who are not white. For

example, white-Asians or other biracial individuals, are deemed not worthy of minority scholarships. They are viewed as unworthy candidates because their biracial background is “perceived as less deserving because of their ‘Whiteness’” (Sanchez and Bonam, 2009, p. 132). This is referred to as “dual minority status,” in which “they may not be perceived as White enough to gain all the privileges associated with being White (e.g., immunity from racial discrimination) but not quite ‘minority enough’ to be viewed as a full member of a racial minority group and thus, deserving of minority fellowships” (Sanchez and Bonam, 2009, p. 133). From cases where white or minority candidates are viewed more favorably than those who are biracial, it is clear that playing up one’s “Whiteness” could offer more benefits in social, work, or academic settings.

The Black-White Binary has reinforced anti-black racism in the United States, resulting in value placed upon lighter skin and European features. The Black-White Binary is “rooted in the either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought” in which privilege must be defined in relation to its other (Collins, 1990). Collins goes on to state:

One must be either Black or white in such thought systems—persons of ambiguous racial and ethnic identity constantly battle with questions such as ‘what are you, anyways?’ This emphasis on quantification and categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked. (1990)

Because white-Asian women may be able to pass as white, but with a unique or different look, they are deemed exotic others. The Black-White Binary has worked to

“govern racial classifications and racial politics in the U.S., most clearly in the formulation of civil rights laws but also in more informal arenas of discussion” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 7). The binary is exclusionary to other people of color, because it operates as if the only two racial groups in the U.S. are black and white, and everything is “best understood through that binary” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 7). With this in mind and white characteristics assigned to biracial white-Asian women, from their physical appearance to their esteemed Model Minority status, it is easy to understand how these women may be lumped into the category “white.” In other words, “‘White’ becomes the pivot point around which all groups are defined,” but color alone does not determine racial identity (Alcoff, 2003, p. 10). She goes on to explain why this binary is harmful when she states, “Thinking of race in terms only of black and white produces a sense of inevitability to white domination which is not empirically supportable...By maintaining the black/white binary we only persist in falsely representing the realities of race in the U.S.” (Alcoff, 2003, p. 18).

Bonilla-Silva (2004) reconceptualized the binary to what he calls a tri-racial order of stratification in the U.S. In this model, there are three racial categories: whites, honorary whites, and the collective black. According to the tri-racial stratification, some multiracials and even Asian-origin people are included in the whites category. Honorary whites include most multiracials and Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino Americans. The collective black includes a few groups of Asian Americans, specifically those who identify as Vietnamese, Hmong, or Laotian. He argues that the honorary white category is used to maintain white supremacy, and acts as an intermediate racial group to buffer

racial conflict while allowing more groups to claim Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Although the tri-racial order is made up of three categories instead of the typical black or white classifications, it still groups people in terms of Whiteness or Blackness, just by varying degrees. This model of the U.S. racial order is complimented by the Model Minority Myth, in which Asian Americans are deemed honorary whites. It can be argued that most biracial white-Asian women would be categorized as white by Bonilla-Silva's (2004) model, because they are multiracial white and Asian, all categories that are defined as white. This model of racial stratification is problematic for multiracial individuals, because they are still largely defined in terms of Whiteness, an identity that is often rejected. Critical Race Theory models will be used in the data analysis section of this thesis to evaluate how Whiteness permeates each participant's racial identity.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Positionality**

My positionality allowed me access to participants as a researcher. My ability to connect with research participants on a personal level gave them a safe space to share their experiences and views of race, which aligns with feminist research practices. I am also a biracial white-Asian woman. I am 26 years old, quarter Japanese, and was raised by a white mom and biracial dad. My dad is half white and half Japanese, but was raised by his white father. Like my participants, I too often struggled with my racial identity and figuring out exactly who I am. For many years, I primarily identified as just white, possibly due to a lack of connection to my family in Japan and the culture. It was not until I started my graduate studies in social justice and human rights that I reflected upon my own race, and what being biracial means. I now proudly identify as Asian too. However, like my participants, I have experienced moments where I do not feel Asian enough when around other Asians, but I also feel out of place sometimes when around white people. As a biracial woman, I find it difficult to navigate exactly where I fit in. I do not view myself as a white person, but because I have experienced white passing and the privilege that comes along with it, I am still hesitant to identify as a woman of color. I do not want to take away from the lived experiences of women who have experienced racism based on their more visible status of being a woman of color. For me, I think this



identity depends heavily on social context and setting, and I find that I still worry about how others would perceive the labels I place upon myself. It is important to me that I do not identify as a woman of color without giving context to how I move through the world as a biracial woman, who is often white passing.

## **Participants**

The data in this paper comes from in-depth, face-to-face interview with 6 biracial white-Asian women living in Virginia or Washington, D.C. The study took place from spring through summer 2018.. All of the interviews were conducted by the author. In the interview portion, snowball sampling was used to find participants via electronic communication, like emails or instant messaging. This method maximized the opportunity to interview women in person, and provided a diverse sample of ethnic backgrounds, ages, and experiences. In addition to snowball sampling, I used social media platforms, such as Facebook groups, to connect with individuals meeting the research criteria. Eligible participants included women who were aged 18+, biracial white-Asian, and United States citizens. I would post an approved script calling for participation, and interested respondents could contact me via email or private message. Women in the Facebook groups were invited to participate in the photo response portion, and interviews if they were local to the Virginia or Washington, D.C. area.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and to ensure consent, privacy and ethical treatment, participants signed an informed consent form for both interviews and photo responses. Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) approval was granted in spring 2018, and data was gathered during that spring and summer of 2018. No incentives were

provided to participants. Once invitations were accepted, interview appointments were established in the home units or public spaces, such as library meeting rooms.

### **Data Collection**

The interviews were designed to follow a semi-structured set of questions. I designed the interview questions to learn how the women identify racially, including if they primarily identify as white or Asian, or truly see themselves as a biracial individual. I wanted to learn what factors most influenced the shaping of this identity, from parents and family structure to peers and the society we live in. I also asked the women if they had experienced being mistaken for white or another race altogether, and if they identified as women of color, explaining why or why not. The interviews each took about an hour, and were audio recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed, the data was reviewed and coded to identify themes. A schedule of the interviews is available in Appendix C.

In addition to the interviews, photos, or selfies, and written responses were gathered from participants matching the same eligibility requirements as interviewees. More than 20 participants submitted photos and responses, but nine are featured in the photo findings chapter. The sample size for photo participants is larger than that of the interview sample, because the photo portion was open to biracial white-Asian women from across the U.S. and submitted electronically. Some of the interview participants did opt to participate in the photo portion too, but a majority of the photo participants were found through social media groups for those who identify as white and Asian. The participants were asked to submit photos as well as a handwritten response to the prompt

“Who are you?” This open ended question was selected as a way to see how these women identify, whether it is primarily with their race, or with other aspects of their identity. For example, some women responded with their professions or educational goals, some talked about being biracial and trying to find a place to fit in, and others mentioned their various intersectional identities, such as sexual orientation. I did not require the photo participants to provide me with their age, racial identity, or other demographic information, because I did not want to influence their response to the question “who are you?” I wanted them to respond in the way they view themselves, and not lead them with questions related to their identities. Participants were aware that the research focused on racial identity for white-Asian women, but I did not ask them any questions about their identities outside of making sure they qualified to participate in the study (white-Asian, woman, aged 18+, U.S. citizen).

### **Analysis**

I began with an interest in experiences of white passing and how whiteness influenced biracial white-Asian women’s racial identity formation. Interviews were coded to find similar themes and experiences between the participants, as well as unique experiences. Common codes included family influence on identity, isolation and a sense of not fitting in, questioning of participants’ racial identity and white passing, and bullying and self-esteem issues. These themes will be discussed in the following chapter, and linked to how each participant views her race. All of these themes influenced the participants’ decisions to identify as a woman of color or not.

## Participant Backgrounds

Six participants participated in the interview portion. As previously mentioned, their names were changed for confidentiality reasons. One common demographic theme I found is that all participants are the children of Asian mothers and white fathers. Three of the participants, Sue, Katrina, and Christine, came from military families, with one or both parents serving. One participant, Heather, is quarter Asian, with a biracial white-Asian mom and white father. Information on the interview participants can be found in the below table:

**Table 1: Interview Participant Demographics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Racial Identity</b>	<b>Age</b>
Sue	White/Japanese	59
Lena	White/Chinese	26
Katrina	White/Japanese/Korean	21
Christine	White/Filipina	24
Kelly	White/Chinese	51
Heather	White/Chinese	25

## **CHAPTER FOUR: INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

### **Discussion (or not) of Racial Identity as a Child**

From my interviews, I found several common themes mentioned by the participants. In addition to all being the children of Asian moms and white dads, almost all of the participants noted that race was seldom discussed in their households growing up. This would often lead to confusion surrounding their biracial identity. Christine, 24, said her mom, who was born in the Philippines, did not often talk about her culture or race. Christine recalled asking her mom if she was Chinese when she was younger:

I was like three years old and we were making spaghetti or something, and when you're that young, I didn't know what Filipino was. So I was just like people that look like that are Chinese, and that's probably a very racist thing to say, but I asked her if she was Chinese and she was like 'No, I'm Filipino.' I was like I don't know what that is, so I'm just gonna call you Chinese for now.

Christine said her parents never had a conversation with her about being biracial, but she probably realized in elementary school that she was white and Asian. She said:

I don't think it ever really hit me. I just kind of grew up...with a tan mom.

Lena, 26, had a similar experience growing up in California with a Chinese mom and white dad. She said:

We never talked about race at all. Not...God, not in any way, shape, or form...It's just one of those things of like looking back, it's like how did I know what I was? Besides...in my eyes it was just normal and then I would just do abnormal things, like use chopsticks and celebrate Chinese New Year and do these weird things with envelopes and wear red on certain days, and like I know all this random information that I think is normal, but other people don't think is normal. So I don't think my parents did a very good job of explaining to me my racial differences.

Sue, 59, grew up with a Japanese mother and white father. Her dad was in the Army, and met her mom in Japan. They married in 1955 and came to the U.S. together. Sue said for the first year and a half of their marriage, her father hid her mother from his family. Being raised in Kentucky, he feared their reactions. However, Sue's mom was later accepted into the family. Sue says her parents did not discuss her race as a child, in part she believes because of the way her dad was raised. When asked if her parents talked about race, Sue said:

Not really. It's so funny because my dad is a little bit of a, we would call him an Archie Bunker type...it's from this TV show that was on in the 70's called All in the Family, and he's a little bit of a bigot. You know he wasn't so open to outsider people. Well, my dad was kind of the same. He was raised in a place where prejudice was pretty prevalent, yet, give me a break, he marries a Japanese woman. So, what the heck?

Because biracialism was not discussed, the participants experienced confusion surrounding their racial identity growing up. This also contributed to the blurring of racial lines and willingness, or unwillingness, to identify as women of color. A lack of conversation about race is uncommon in communities of color, which draws parallels to how whiteness operates and the lack of racial identity surrounding white individuals. It is possible race was never discussed because the participants had white fathers, who likely never questioned their whiteness, and Asian mothers, who in several cases tried to assimilate.

### **On the Cusp of a Culture**

Most of the participants also described feeling a lack of connection to their Asian culture or feeling like an outsider when visiting Asian family or interacting with Asian peers. Christine recalled growing up and visiting Hawaii, where her mom grew up and several of their family members still live. She described visiting family and starting to make the connection that certain dishes her mom cooked were Filipino food. The family visits helped put her racial identity into perspective, even if she felt she could not fully identify with her Asian family members. Christine said:

But once we started to go visit that family a bit more, I'm like oh ok this is definitely a cultural thing, and I'm just kind of on the outside of it, like I'm just on the cusp because my mom...Like she was bad at kind of bringing us into her culture.

Because of World War II and prevalent anti-Japanese sentiment, Sue said her mom felt the need to assimilate. In turn, she did not learn much about her Japanese culture. Sue said:

My mom didn't really say, 'Stand up for yourself. Show your Japanese.' No, she did not teach us the language, because she was trying to Americanize herself. She didn't lose her heritage, because she had friends and they would speak Japanese. When I lived over there I could follow the thread of the conversation, but I never really could speak, because I was just a little girl.

Kelly, 51, is white and Chinese. She grew up in Minnesota and attended college there. Like other participants, she did not feel fully accepted by Asians as an Asian, especially as a young adult in college. She said about Asian peers:

So within the community it really sort of stratified, like there were layers. So there were first generation, second generation, third generation, and then the mixed kids. There was this sort of sense that yes we accept you because we accept everybody...But these people who are first generation...wanted to kind of claim this...Because you're not really Chinese. You might speak some of the language, you probably eat the food, you can use chopsticks, but you're not really Chinese. And that felt weird, because actually we probably had a very similar mothering experience.

In my analysis I will describe how this lack of connection to culture, or feeling like an outsider, influenced the participants' identification as women of color. The sense of being an outsider, or on the cusp of one culture, also played a role in the women's self-



esteem. Furthermore, experiences of white passing or wanting to be more white impacted their racial identity formation.

### **What Are You?**

All of the participants described experiences where their race was questioned by others. The questions were not exclusive to one group of people though. White people and people of color, including Asians, all questioned the women on how they identified racially. In some instances, the women were asked to prove that they were part Asian. When talking about the questions she got regarding her race throughout her life, Sue said:

Sometimes the questions are annoying too though, aren't they? Don't you find they're a way of putting you outside the box in a way?

She also discussed the "privilege of not being questioned" about one's race. This idea can be linked to the experience of Lena, who described the questions as a degrading sort of classification. Growing up with what Lena described as a year-round tan in California, people would often guess she was Filipina, Mexican, or Middle Eastern. Lena said:

No one ever guessed what was right and like for some people, it was all a game. Like 'oh, let me guess what you are,' and like ok, that's not belittling at all or whatever.

Katrina, 21, is white and Japanese. She said she finds it is mostly Asians who ask about her race. She said people approach her in everyday interactions, like checking out at the store, or even at work in a restaurant. She said:

It made me feel like a zoo animal or something...I think it's more so because I'm Japanese and white. They tend to grab onto the fact that I'm Japanese and white so much more than the fact that I'm just biracial with Asian and white...I guess having pale skin is idolized because of staying indoors and not being out in the fields, just the whole history portion of it. Because I have my Asianness in my white skin, it's kind of like 'oh, you're the perfect Asian now.' I've gotten a lot of compliments on the fact that I'm really pale and Asian from Asians. They're just like 'your skin is so good.'

As a grown up, Kelly and her family lived in China for several years. Similarly to Katrina, Kelly also experienced questions about her race from locals in Chengdu, China throughout the 90's. She said:

It was very unusual to see Westerners, let alone Westerners who look like you...and that's the kind of questions I would get. 'Why do you have,' and then fill in the blank...Then I would have to say, and my Mandarin was good because I went through U.S. government training, 'My mom is Chinese. My dad is not.' So they were sort of intrigued, but in the way that they're intrigued by, say, a talking dog. It's the exotic pet from afar.

Christine, who went to college in South Carolina, remembers being asked on campus about her race. She said:

I remember I was walking to class and some guy....He came up to me and said, 'what are you?' and I was like this is not the place to be asking about my race. It's

like why are you asking me this right now? But yeah, I would get that question a lot, like I still get it now.

Heather, 25, is quarter Chinese and white. She acknowledges presenting as white because of her blue eyes and blonde hair. However, she grew up mostly in China and attended Chinese schools. When her family moved back to the U.S., she did notice a difference in the way she was treated. Heather said:

One of the things I noticed was people who were also mixed race or who were Asian American didn't feel as accepting of my identity because I present so white. They would ask me to prove it...It was frustrating to know and feel that I have a claim on this part of my identity, but then have people tell me that I don't actually...One kid in college I remember wanted to see a picture of my grandmother, and he wanted to see a picture of me with my grandmother, and I was very angry about that.

### **Bullying and Self-esteem**

Several of the participants also experienced self-esteem issues related to their identity and how they looked. Often times their stories cited school and their peers during their teen years, when women start to feel societal pressure about their physical appearance. Katrina described feeling pressure to fit in and being self-conscious of the opinions of others. She said:

I always wanted to look more white, just always. I always wanted to fit in with people. I actually really didn't appreciate my Asian culture at all when I was growing up...So I would actually be really like upset with my eyes, like I always

wished that I had blue eyes and always wished that they were like bigger to be able to fit in with that. And I felt that that was such an important thing, to fit in, so that was actually really difficult growing up.

Sue experienced overt racism during her school years, with peers using racial slurs or racist jokes. Like Katrina, she felt that she did not fit on based on her physical appearance. Sue said:

I did get teased a lot...I mean I got called Jap or half-breed, and sometimes it was kidding, but it did kind of make you feel on the outside of the group. You know what I mean? Like I'm not quite in, because I don't have blond hair or blue eyes, or just brown hair and brown eyes that are regular, you know.

Lena, who grew up in California, said multiracial children were common, but there were few other multiracial Asian peers. Her high school was diverse, but students would seek peers of the same race to hang out with. Because she was biracial, Lena did not fit in with the Asian community. She said:

I would say that I understood that I was not accepted into the Asian community, because in high school kids would ask me a bunch of weird questions and then call me a Twinkie.

Kelly described reactions she received from locals in Taiwan while out with her daughter, who is also biracial white and Asian. She said:

I got married and we moved overseas, and moved to Asia. In Taiwan, people thought I was Filipina, because there were many, many Filipinas living there and working in domestic service. So after my baby was born, super blonde haired,

blue eyed baby, people would ask me, ‘How much are those white people paying you?’ Because I’m obviously the Filipina nanny.

Questions and microaggressions like the experiences described above regarding the participants’ race led to low self-esteem in some cases and questioning of the self, making the participants self-reflect on their own identities and how society views them. The women understood their biracial identities created boundaries, both with Asians and whites, creating confusion around their own racial identity.

### **The Importance of Appearance**

A couple of the women discussed their Asian moms’ fixation on appearance, both with themselves and their children, in terms of skin tone, hair, and other physical features. Sue describes her Japanese mother as being very “glamorous,” with “never a hair out of place.” This concern for appearance was also extended to her daughter. For example, Sue’s mom would not let her go to the pool and tan as a form of punishment. She said:

You know what happened to me when I was a high schooler? If my mom wanted to lay down some law or something, she’d say, ‘you cannot go to the pool and lay out. It’s terrible that you go bake yourself in the sun.’ And that’s before we had sunscreen, so we’d be slathering on baby oil. I tanned really well, so here I thought I was looking super cute, and my mom was like ugh, because to her it’s like she did not like to go out in the sun. You know how Japanese are? Oh my god, they even golf with...long sleeves and gloves, cause it’s a sign of [being] upper class.

Kelly also described instances where her Chinese mother was critical of her appearance. When discussing her Asian and Western features, Kelly says it was her “mom’s job” to point out those differences. She said:

My mom can point out all the things about me that...that’s a whole other thing to unpack, you know, being raised by an Asian mom.

Kelly also told a story about dying her hair blonde when she was a teenager, and the disapproval from her mom. She said:

I thought my mother was going to kill me...My mother can list my imperfections, my physical imperfections, most of them based on race. Sadly, I could list all that for you because that’s what I heard growing up...So the summer I went blonde...well, of course I never really got blonde blonde, but it kind of went orange. Then being outside, I also turned really, really dark, and my mom was like, ‘Your skin’s getting darker and your hair’s getting lighter, and I don’t know who you are. Can you just pick a side? Like what do you want to be?’

She went on to list some of the traits that her mom viewed as imperfections, such as not having Asian eyes, but not having blue eyes either, not inheriting her father’s height, but inheriting her mother’s moles, and having wide feet. However, Kelly credits her white dad for often telling her that “different is good.”

Lena said she started to compare herself to other girls in middle school, and these comparisons made her realize in part that she was biracial. She said:

But I think I knew that I...was like multiple identities was probably elementary school or middle school. Yeah, probably like middle school in sixth grade when

you know, as a woman, particularly when you're like hitting puberty and all this stuff, and you're just looking around and no one really looks like you. I think that is definitely a deciding factor. Cause like also for Asian girls, in life, they're just like slim and petite and all that stuff, and I wasn't. So like it's hard to not compare yourself, right?

### **White Passing and Racial Identity Evolution**

As discussed in the literature review, biracial individuals' racial identity may change throughout their life. This identity is contingent upon experiences, age, family and friends, and even social setting. Additionally, white passing can also influence how a biracial white-Asian woman may identify in various social settings or how they identify themselves on forms asking about race. Sue explains how her racial identity has changed during her life, saying:

You know it's changed over the years, as things have become more accepted. I used to be white. I can be whatever I want. Sometimes I'm white. Sometimes I'll check both boxes, white and Asian/Pacific Islander, because I don't feel rightly like I'm Asian/Pacific Islander. I don't speak the language. I'm not culturally from Japan or anything. I was born in New Jersey, but my mom is full-blooded Okinawan or Japanese....So sometimes I waiver. I go over the line, because I think of my generation, I felt pressured to be white sometimes, but I knew I was different. A lot of people didn't realize that I was half Asian.

Kelly says she always viewed being biracial as something special, but when she entered college, she made more of an attempt to connect with her Asian side and other Asians. She says:

And then college changed, because then I was like look, I got a Norwegian first name and a Scottish last name, but half of me is not covered in my name, so I'm gonna scream it from the rooftops. I'm gonna join every Asian activity, every association. I was in an all Asian play, dyed my hair black for it. I don't know, I was going to be Asian 100%.

Lena, white and Chinese, also said her racial identity changed over time. She mostly checks the "other" box now. Lena said:

I think when I was younger I was told to put white, I think, and then later on I would only put Asian. But nowadays I just put mixed or other...When I was younger you didn't have an option of putting 'other.' You had to say I'm one or the other, and I guess it just depended on my mood or how I felt other people would question me on what I was. And then after leaving California and studying student affairs, I think it just helped me put into perspective that it's ok to identify with more than one thing, and that's not a horrible thing...Times have changed.

Christine, white and Filipina, said she only checks Asian now when filling out forms that ask her to self-identify. She said:

I think at some point if they gave you an option to check two then I would, but now I'm just like no, I'm checking Asian like all the time...I don't know why, I never want to be called white. I don't know if that's just because of like things that



are happening around the world and like just in the country, or here in D.C., but I always want to be known as not white. And then my boyfriend, he's like no, you're white, like you're a white girl. I'm like no I'm not. I always identify as Asian.

Heather selects both white and Asian when asked to self-identify. She said that in the U.S., she was initially hesitant to check the Asian box because she is white passing. She said:

I am very white presenting, and so with that comes all of the privilege in this society that goes along with it. So my struggle with my identity has been more about feeling like it's ok to accept my Asian identity rather than sort of being caught between two halves of my identity. It's more saying it doesn't matter to me what other people say. It is ok to embrace this part of me because it is such a big part of me.

Katrina also says she passes for white in comparison to her two sisters. She said some peers viewed her more as white while others viewed her more as Asian, which led to confusion surrounding her identity. When asked how she views herself, Katrina said she sees herself as mostly white, but does self-identify as Asian too when filling out forms. She said:

I don't know, I feel it's even more confusing because of the fact that I'm the...I don't want to say the whitest, but I'm the palest one in my family because I got my dad's skin and I have freckles. My two older sisters, they don't, and they get really dark during the summer so whenever we go to visit in Hawaii, my dad and I stick

out like a sore thumb cause we're with all these Asians and then my sisters get dark and my mom gets really dark...So I've found when I'm around my Asian family, I stick out so much.

### **Women of Color?**

Each participant was asked if she identified as a woman of color, and to explain why or why not. Their responses can be telling when it comes to how they predominantly see themselves, if they identify more as Asian or white. Some of the participants' responses were based on how they think society views them, notably their skin tone. Only two of the participants, Sue and Katrina, said they did not identify as women of color.

Both are white and Japanese with fairer skin. Sue said:

No, I don't...I kind of feel like I'm somewhere in the middle. I really do. I don't feel all white, whatever that is, European. I mean I'm half Irish and half Japanese...But I consider myself American. I think that's an easier designation.

She went on to explain that she thinks identifying as a person of color is getting more difficult for multiracial people, especially if they have features that are typically white.

Katrina, also white and Japanese, was more indecisive about identifying as a woman of color. She said:

I don't know...it's kind of like yes and no. More so no, but just because of the fact that I know how I look towards others, that would be why I would say that. But I would have to say that I don't, because of the fact of my upbringing, who I've

been around, how I feel that I act isn't necessarily more towards my Asian culture or history. But how people see me, that would be different in terms of that.

Because of abuse she experienced by her father growing up, Lena never wanted to be associated with whiteness, but she did not always identify as a woman of color. She said she started to identify as a woman of color within the last two years, which corresponds with when she graduated with her master's degree in student affairs. Lena said:

But in high school when that term [person of color] started getting popular, I only thought of like black, Latino, you know like people who were of darker skin, and now it seems to be more embraced with the Asian community as well because you know, we are not white...I see more Asian people calling themselves brown, which is interesting. So yea, like nowadays I do. In the past I would just be like no, I'm Asian.

Heather, the only participant who is quarter Asian, does identify as a woman of color. She said:

I wouldn't go around saying it, because I would feel like I'm appropriating something from women of color who wear their color a little more obviously than I do. So all of my friends know that is how I identify. My family knows that's how I identify. But it's not something I choose to share immediately with a new acquaintance...It feels too delicate a subject to approach, especially with another woman of color.

As seen through the participants views on identifying as women of color, the women recognize that they might face push back on identifying this way simply based on how others view them. This raises the question of how influential the opinion of others might be when it comes to the research population forming their racial identity. This outside influence of how others perceive and view them makes navigating their identity that much more difficult.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: PHOTO FINDINGS**

### **Who Are You?**

A total of 23 biracial white-Asian women submitted photos and handwritten responses to the question “who are you?” Participants were recruited through social media groups dedicated to those identifying as white and Asian and provided with an overview of the research and consent form to participate. Most provided their written consent, photos, and responses via email or private message on the social media platform from which they were recruited. Some interview participants did opt to participate in the photo portion as well, and were given instructions and the photo consent form at time of interview. A diverse range of Asian ethnicities are represented in the photo participants, including Thai, Japanese, Filipina, and Chinese. Their responses ranged from two sentences to two pages. Many of the participants answered only in relation to their race, but others mentioned their education, profession, and various other identities that make them who they are, such as sexual orientation or dietary preferences.

### **Hapa or Hapu**

In terms of race, some of the women identified as hapa. The term hapa is Native Hawaiian meaning part or mix. Hapa alone does not have any racial meaning. However, miscegenation occurred when Europeans came to Hawaii, which led to the birth of a population of multiracial individuals. Hawaiians started to use hapa haole to describe this

population, with haole meaning foreigner. Hapa Haole is used to describe those of mixed race heritage, and now refers to “any person of mixed Asian Pacific American descent.” The use of hapa is debated within the community. Although many white-Asian people identify this way, Hawaiian indigenous groups says hapa is used inaccurately and is “an extension of colonization” (Bernstein and De la Cruz, 2009). Four of the participants identified themselves as hapa. The participant in Figure 1 below identifies as hapa:

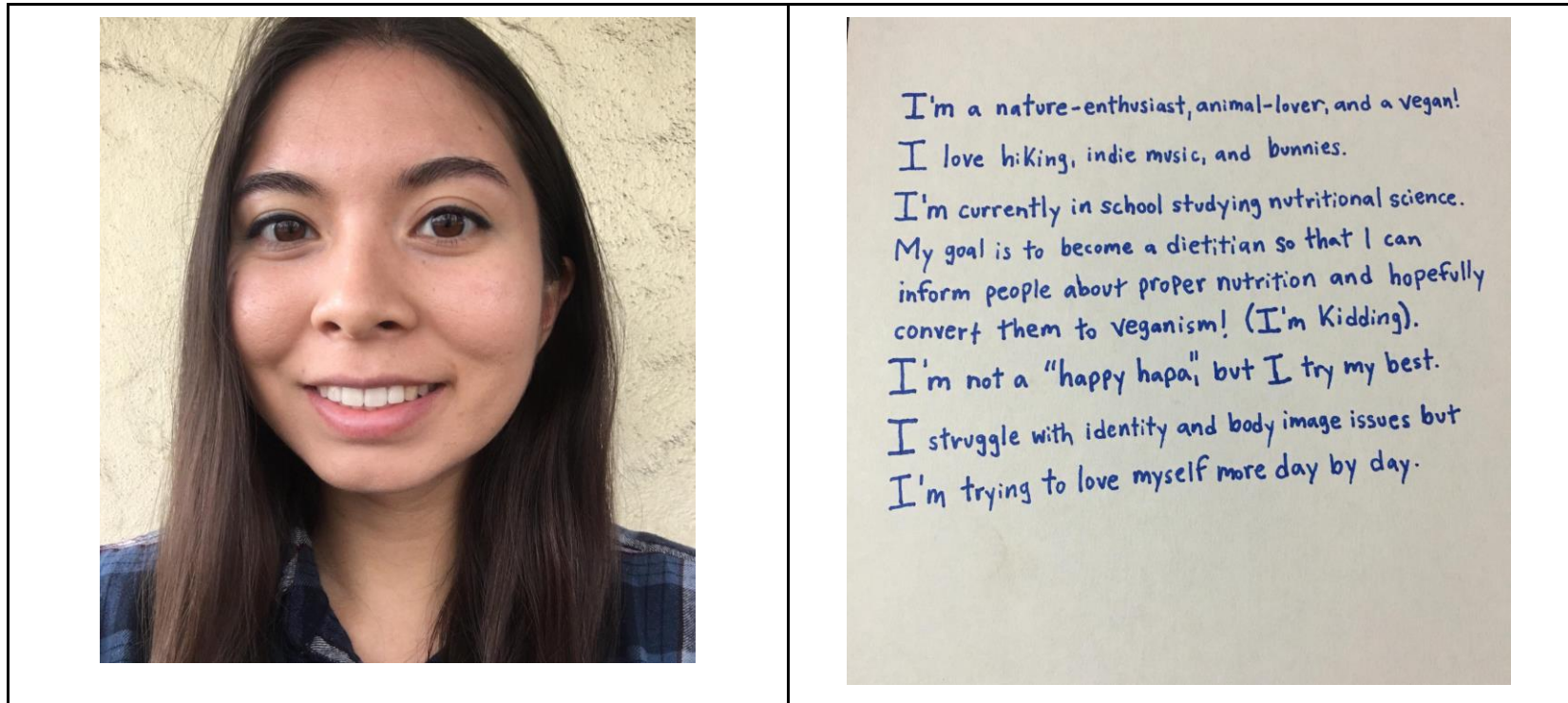


Figure 1

Two participants identified as hafu, which is used to describe those who are white and Japanese. Hafu, meaning half in Japanese, refers to someone who has parents of two different races or nationalities. Without context to signify which races, hafu most commonly describes someone with one Japanese parent and one foreign parent (Yamashiro, 2017). This term is also widely debated, because mixed race Japanese are not viewed as true or pure-blooded in Japanese culture. Because the term is based on physiological traits, like hair color, skin tone, and eye shape, as well as ancestry, language ability, and cultural knowledge, hafus are often marginalized because they are only part Japanese (Yamashiro, 2017). Figure 2 below depicts the participant who identified as hafu. She also identifies as a woman of color.



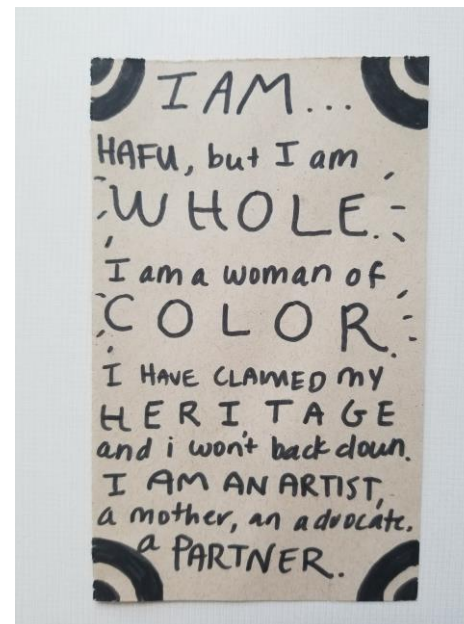


Figure 2

### **I Can't Fit in Anywhere**

Several of the participants stated that they do not fit in anywhere because they are biracial white-Asian. Their responses are based on cultural differences, feeling a lack of connection to their Asian culture, and physical characteristics. The participant in Figure 3 below notes her two different cultures when explaining why she “can’t fit in anywhere.”



I am a daughter.  
I am a musician.  
I am from 2 different cultures,  
yet I feel like I can't fit in anywhere.

Figure 3

The participant in Figure 4 identifies as white and Filipina and describes herself as standing “on the border of two very different cultures,” and never feeling that she truly belongs. “My identity is complex and I’m still learning to believe that I AM ENOUGH,” she said.

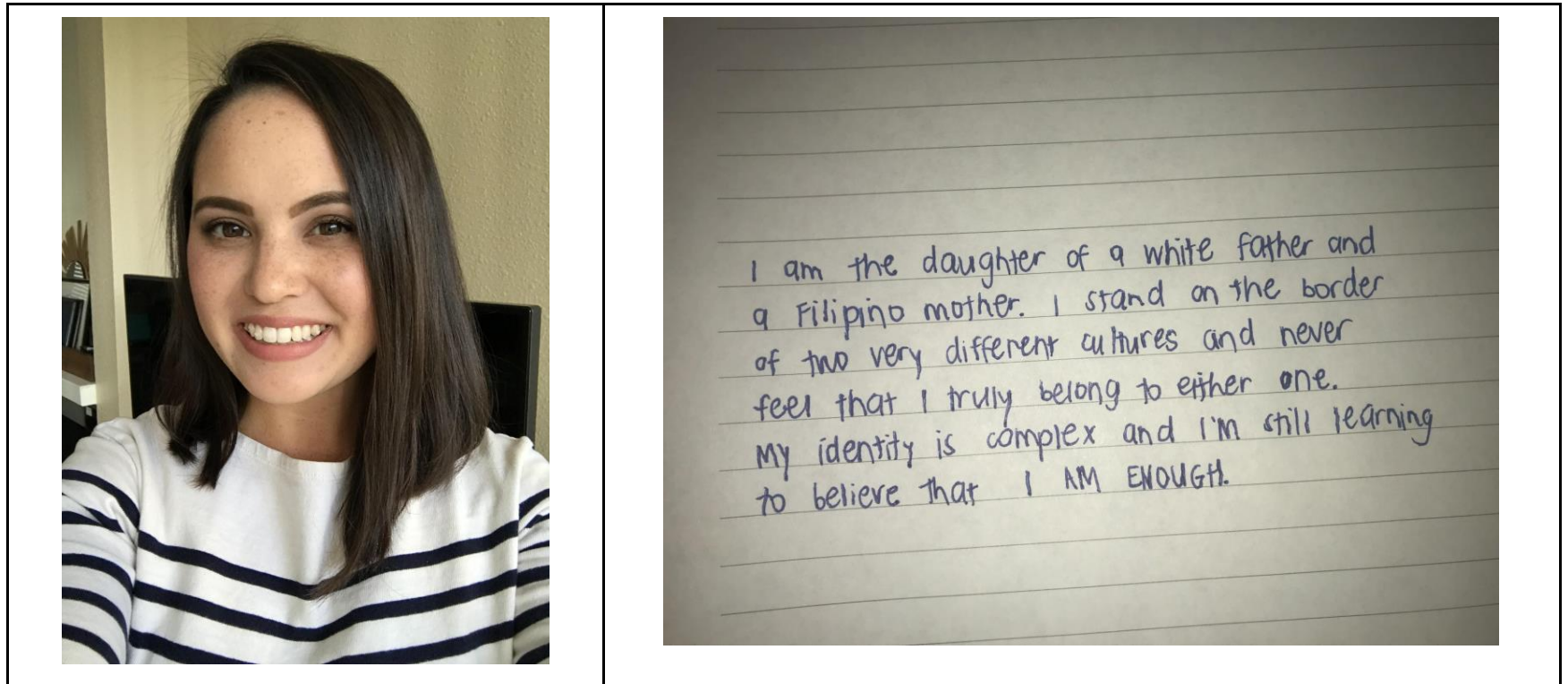


Figure 4

Another participant in Figure 5 described herself as “the other,” since she is Japanese, Irish, and Scottish. Because she is multiracial with multiple cultures, she said, “I fit in nowhere and everywhere.”

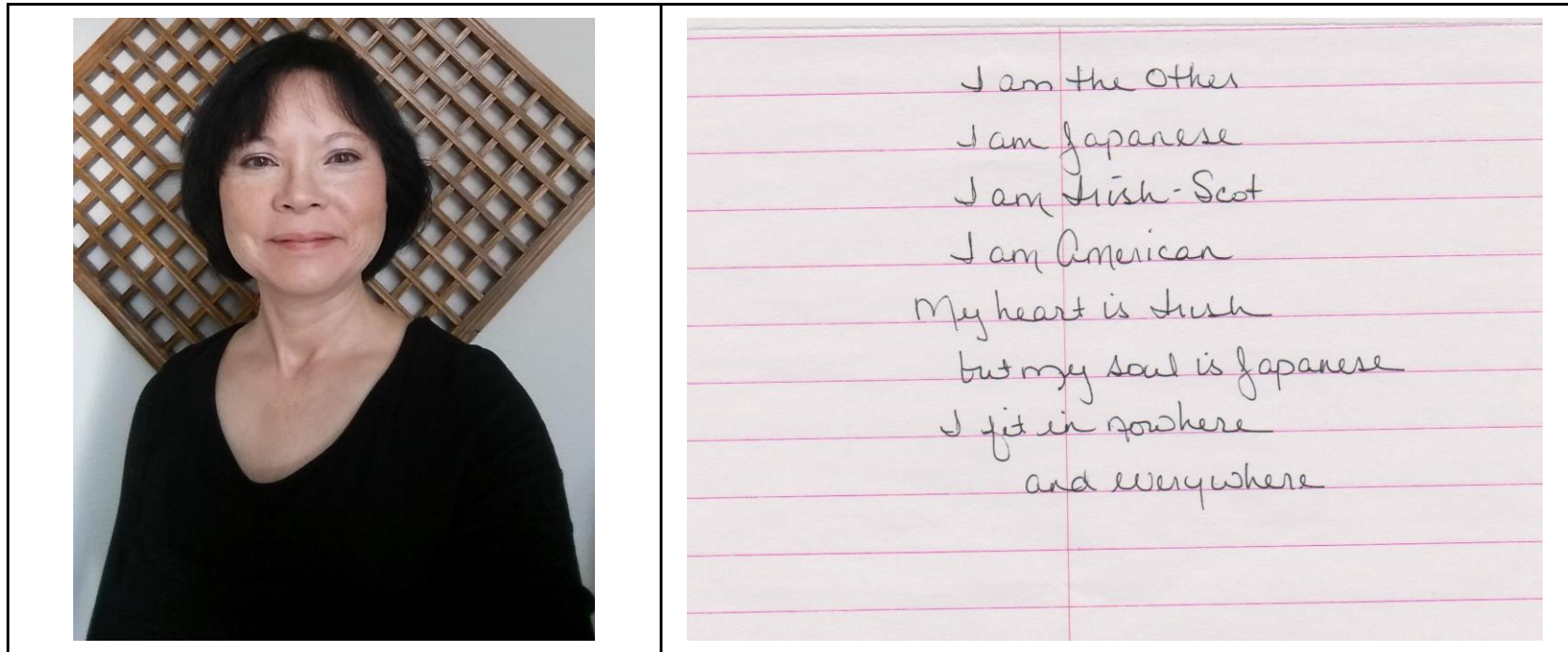


Figure 5

### **Not Half, but Whole**

Alternatively, a few participants embraced being mixed race and of two cultures. Multiracial individuals might describe themselves in halves or quarters, but a few women embraced their full identity and expressed this as being “whole” or both.” The participant in Figure 6 acknowledges that she does not always know where she fits in, and she “is half yet double” and “not enough but also twice as much.” She is white and Filipina and also identifies as hapa.






I don't always know who I am or where I fit in. Sometimes I'm goofy. Other, I'm shy. I love exploring new hiking trails. I hug every dog I meet. I'm always attempting new recipes (pinoy is the best ). I'm white and Filipino. I'm hapa. I'm half yet double. I'm not enough but also twice as much. More than anything, I'm taking it a day at a time.

Figure 6

The participant in Figure 7 is unique as she does not identify her racial identity when explaining who she is. Instead, she acknowledges that she is biracial, and instead of viewing herself as part or half of one race, she unapologetically embraces herself as a full individual.

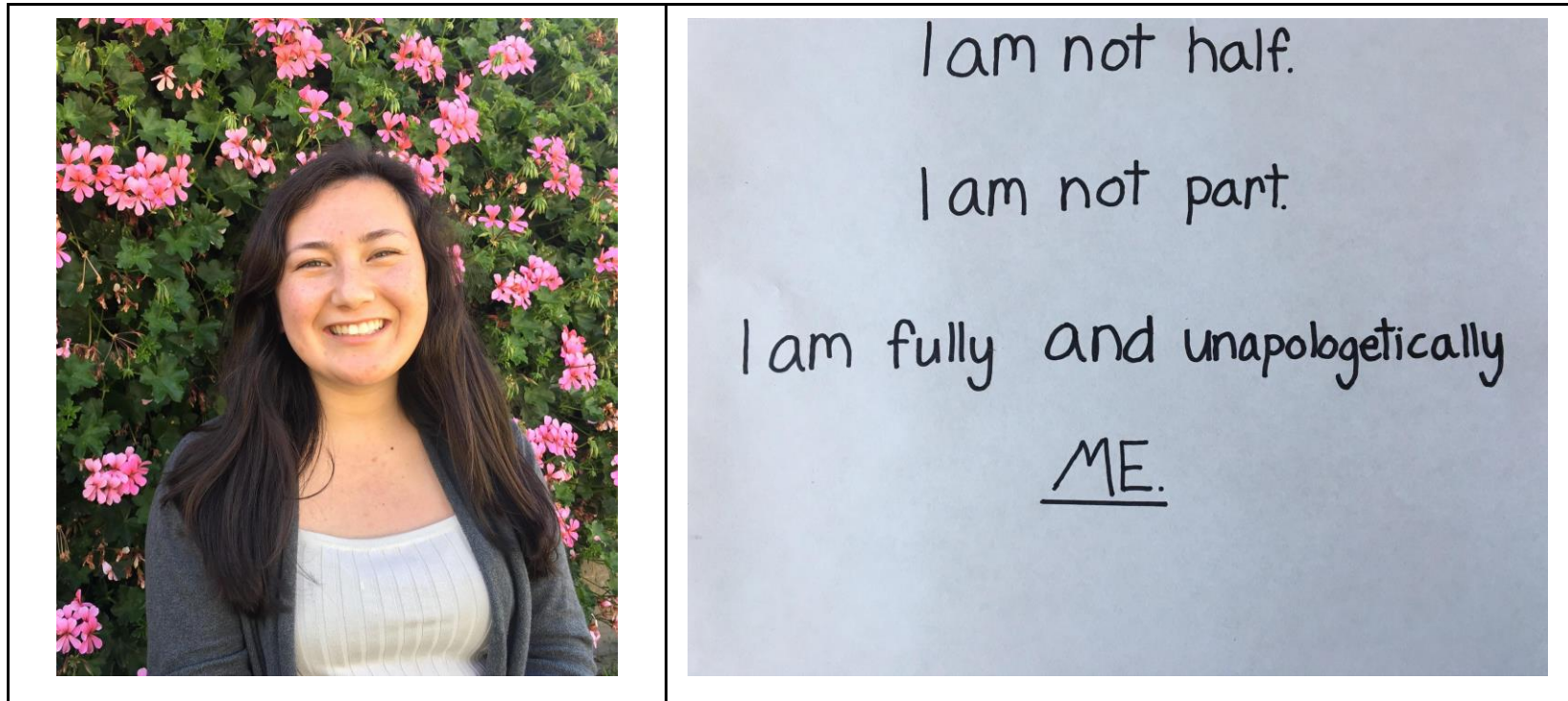


Figure 7

## **Beyond Race**

In addition to race, several women identified who they are by the various roles they play in life, like being a mother (Figure 2) or daughter (Figure 4). They also shared what they were studying and future professional goals (Figure 1), hobbies (Figure 3 and Figure 6), dietary preferences (Figure 1) and sexual orientation. The woman in Figure 8 was the only participant to address sexual orientation. She also identifies her profession as filmmaking.

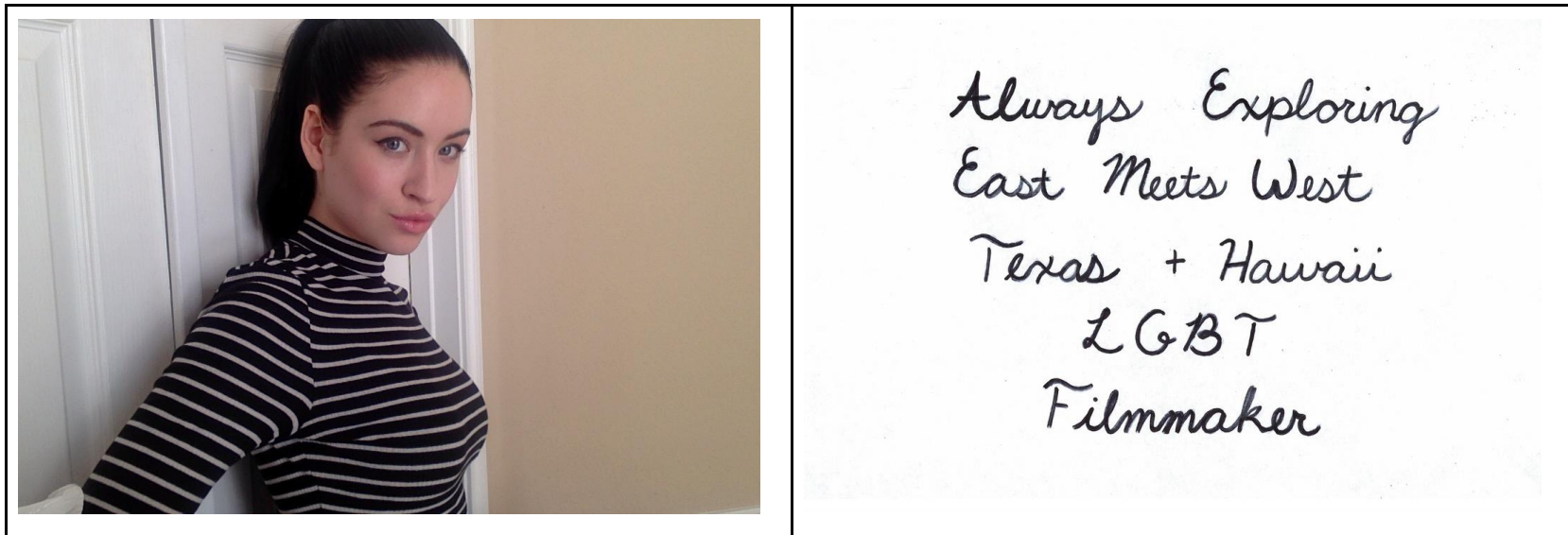


Figure 8

Another participant featured in Figure 9 spoke only of her professional goal and hobbies.

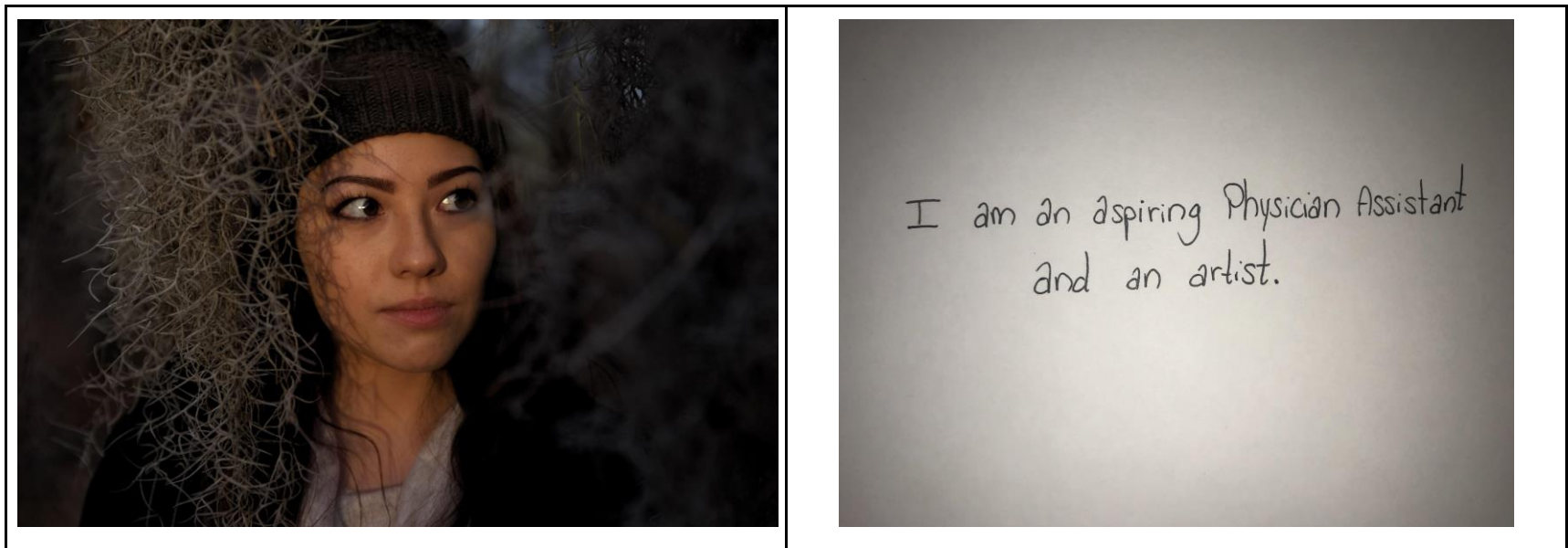


Figure 9

## **Language Patterns**

Several of the women used common words or phrases to describe their racial identity and experiences as white-Asian women. Eight of the 23 participants said they did not “fit in,” or “belong,” and felt like an “outsider” or “other” when describing who they were. In her response, one woman wrote, “I’ve never felt like I quite fit in anywhere. I’m too white to be Asian, and too Asian to be white.” Because several of the women described feeling like outsiders or not belonging based on their racial identity, they also wrote about their self-esteem or body image issues in their written responses. Four of the 23 participants cited self-esteem issues related to their racial identity, including the women in Figures 1, 4, and 6. One participant wrote that she was often referred to as a “dirty haole” by classmates in Hawaii. She was frustrated, because the “bullying and taunting were ceaseless.” In contrast to those struggling with their racial identity, six photo participants described feeling “whole” or “both,” and unapologetic for being who they are. This includes the women in Figures 2, 6, and 7. One participant submitted a poem in response to “who are you?” in which she stated, “I am boundless and free. I am unapologetically me.”

From the range of responses featured in this chapter, it is clear that biracial white-Asian women consider various aspects of their identities when determining who they are as a person. Several of the participants did include their racial identity as part of who they are, either because they struggle with navigating their two different cultures as biracial individuals or feel empowered and embrace being mixed race. The implications of these



findings, including the importance of differentiating between “what are you?” and “who are you?” will be discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

*“I am very white presenting, and so with that comes all of the privilege in this society that goes along with it. So my struggle with my identity has been more about feeling like it’s ok to accept my Asian identity rather than sort of being caught between two halves of my identity. It’s more saying it doesn’t matter to me what other people say. It is ok to embrace this part of me because it is such a big part of me.” -Heather, 25, white and quarter Chinese*

The data from the interviews and photos support existing research that biracial individuals experience internal difficulty navigating their racial identity, in addition to the various outside factors that might influence how they choose to identify. However, because research is still lacking in mixed race studies, particularly scholarship on white-Asian women, further research is needed to understand themes that complicate existing findings. This is due to the gendered ways mixed race women are viewed in society, as well as the Black-White Binary and Model Minority Myth, both of which influence racial identity of white-Asian women. In this chapter, I discuss why this study was limited to white-Asian women and why a photo portion was critical to understanding the topic, I situate my findings in the context of existing scholarship, I offer recommendations for areas of additional research, and I disclose limitations, including my positionality.

### **Limiting the Study Population**

Research and understanding on biracialism is crucial since those who are mixed race fundamentally disrupt common perceptions of race and the black-white binary on

which the U.S. was founded and continues to operate. It is important to note that there are several identities that multiracial individuals hold, some of whom are more than two races. For this research I specifically chose to limit the population to white-Asian women from the U.S. for two reasons. I recognize there are Asian mixed race individuals who are not white, but for this particular study I wanted to focus on how white-Asian women navigate their racial identity since they hold both privileged and marginalized identities. Many of my participants were white passing and their mixed race identity was often unrecognizable by others. This aspect of their identity was important to study in order to understand the privileges they hold as white passing individuals, but also the internal conflict or confusion that may cause to their racial identity when they also identify as Asian. Because of their identification as white-Asian women, they were also susceptible to stereotypes perpetuated by the Model Minority Myth and hypersexualization as the exotic “other.”

### **Including a Visual Representation**

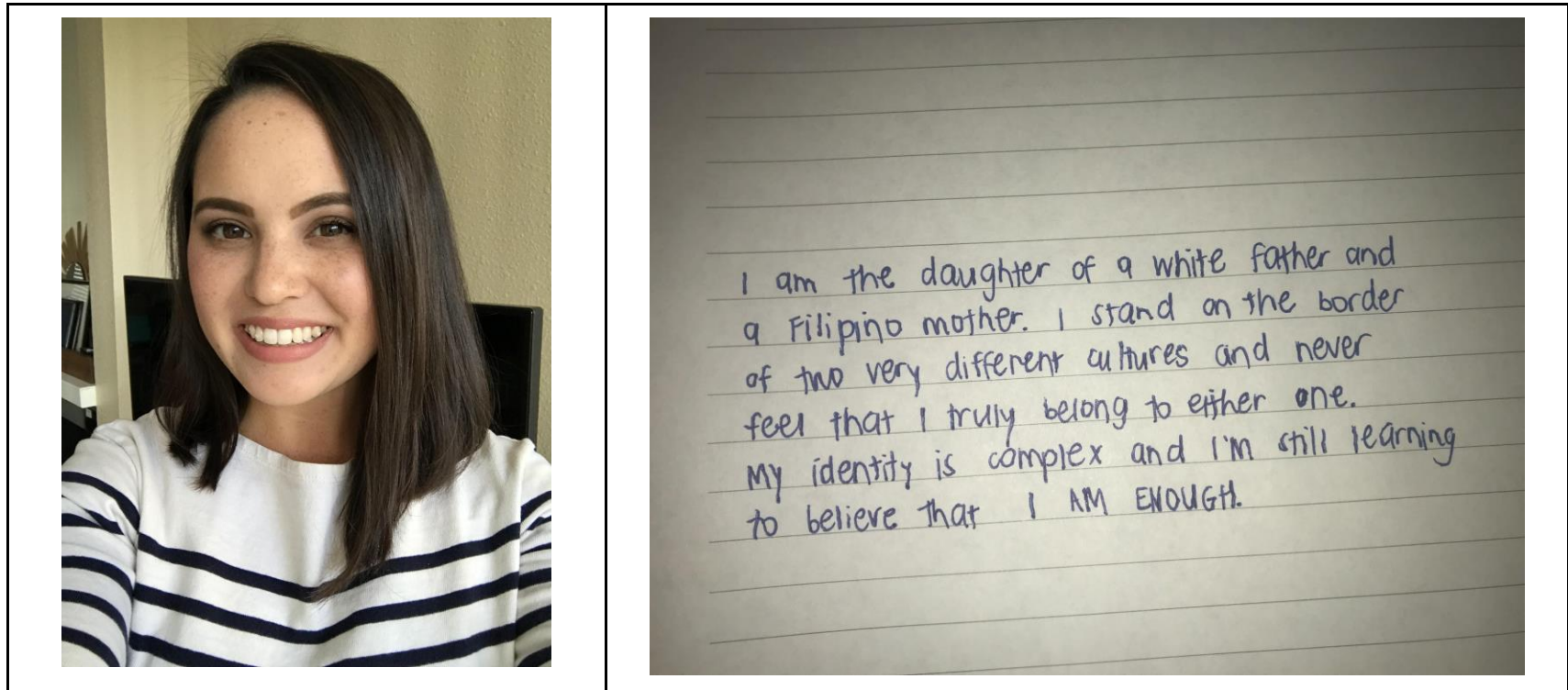


Figure 10

Some of the interview participants did opt to also participate in the photo portion. I decided to add the photo portion to have a visual representation of the research. This was important for two reasons. First, people unfamiliar with this topic may not understand the relevancy of understanding racial identity for those who are mixed race. The experiences and racial identity of biracial individuals, especially white-Asian women, are often subjected to how others interpret their physical appearance. This is evident through the various questions participants received about their racial identity, even from strangers, and then how that information is often used against them in terms of bullying or feeling as if they cannot claim one of their identities. It might even prompt readers to make their own judgements or classifications about the participants' racial identities, which this research demonstrates is problematic behavior in our society. Second, the photos illuminate the beautiful variety in the way that white-Asian women appear physically. The women all share a white and Asian identity in common, but outside of that, there are several differences in their appearances. These differences are not only in physical appearance, but in how each woman identifies, the conflicts they experience related to race or how they embrace their biracial identity, and how they see themselves outside of their racial identity, which is just one component in their full identities.

### **Choosing an Identity: White, Asian, or White-Asian?**

White-Asian women share a privileged and marginalized racial identity, making it difficult to negotiate their identity, both internally and externally, based on the perceptions of others. White-Asian women face several challenges in regards to forming

their racial identity, at times marginalizing them from both whites and Asians. These challenges include a lack of discussion or understanding of their biracialism growing up, feeling like an outsider and experiencing bullying, questioning of race and projections of racial identity from others, and a Black-White Binary that reinforces non-fluid identities that can only exist in the realm of whiteness or blackness. This binary often leaves biracial individuals feeling as if they must choose one race. Furthermore, in the case of these participants, the binary reinforces that they are not Asian enough to claim an Asian identity, yet unable or unwilling to claim whiteness. While the Black-White Binary is exclusionary to other races by positing that racial identity lies at only two poles rather than along a spectrum, in the case of biracial individuals who are white passing, this construction of race as a binary can actually push them further towards whiteness. As discussed by the participants, this is often times not an identity they wish to claim. However, because society views race as either black or white, they are lumped into the category of whiteness without their consent and often against their preference. People of color and multiracials deemed to be in the white or honorary white categories identified by Bonilla-Silva (2004) should be weary of and reject these labels, because they are tools of white supremacy. As it pertains to Asian Americans, they may be viewed as honorary whites, but “they will also continue to suffer from discrimination and be regarded in many quarters as ‘perpetual foreigners’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004, p. 944). The Black-White Binary traps them, not allowing white-Asian women to have the agency to claim their own racial identity. Instead, they are forced to deal with projections of how others view

them, which can lead to internal conflict, low self-esteem, and the inability to develop or challenge their own racial identity during critical years of growth and identity formation.

### **Implications of the Model Minority Myth on Racial Identity**

The Black-White Binary, coupled with the Model Minority Myth for white-Asian women, continues to push them towards whiteness. As stated by Bonilla-Silva, Asians will perpetually be viewed as foreigners, yet the Model Minority Myth has been used in the U.S. to cause division between Asian Americans and other communities of color, particularly Black Americans. Again, this is due to the power of the system of white supremacy, assigning seemingly positive attributes to Asian Americans, like intelligence and a strong work ethic, as a way to set them apart from other people of color. In this way, Asians have become an accepted minority, viewed as non-threatening and capable of assimilation in the eyes of Whiteness. The myth and binary work together in pushing Asians, especially those of mixed-race ancestry who are white and Asian, towards the white end of the racial identity spectrum. This affects white-Asian women very differently than it may a biracial white-Asian man though. Biracial women have an easier time blurring racial boundaries than biracial men, and women are less likely to be categorized as minorities. This means that biracial women are often perceived as white, even if they are mixed race. Because biracial women may defy racial categorization, more value is placed on their physical appearance and attractiveness in comparison with biracial men (Davenport, 2016). Asian women are also stereotypically viewed as hypersexualized, quiet, or obedient. Because of this, White-Asian women may be viewed as exotic, yet still white enough to pass in acceptable ways. This combination of

whiteness, and the exoticization as other, allows them to attain some of the privileges granted through Whiteness. This explanation could also account for the high number of interracial relationships between white men and Asian women, both according to data on interracial marriage and population growth, and the couplings of the white-Asian women interviewed for this research.

### **Limitations**

The study had several limitations. First, a sample of six interview participants and nine photo participants is not enough to generalize the experiences of all white-Asian women from the U.S. As noted, several of the participants had similar racial backgrounds, and though their sexual orientation was not the subject of the inquiry, half of the interview participants were in a relationship with men. A larger study encompassing more women of various ages, ethnicities, social classes, sexual orientations, and so on would provide more generalizability. With a larger study sample, we could learn more about how the various intersections and other privileged or marginalized identities that biracial white-Asian women hold influence their racial identity.

Second, the interview participants for this study all resided in Virginia or Washington, D.C. at the time of the interview. Several of the women were raised elsewhere during formative years, whether in the U.S. or Asia. However, their current experiences could largely be informed by their current residence and others they interact with in that location. For this reason, biracial white-Asian women residing on the west coast may have vastly different experiences from those residing in Virginia and



Washington, D.C. The 2010 U.S. Census states that 5.5% of Virginia's more than 8 million total population identifies as Asian, and only 2.9% identify as two or more races, though those races are not specified. For Washington, D.C., Asians make up 3.5% of the more than 600,000 total population. Their percentage of population identifying as more than two races is the same as Virginia, at 2.9%. These numbers are in steep contrast to larger states like California, where the population totals more than 37 million, and 13% identify as Asian and 4.9% identify as two or more races. The data for Hawaii is unique in that a greater percentage of the state's population identifies as Asian (38.6%) than white (24.7%). Additionally, those who identify as two or more races, 23.6%, is nearly equal to the white population at 24.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is also important to note that the 2010 Census is only the second time in history that the population could even identify as more than one race. Because such a small percentage of the population identifies as Asian or two or more races in locations like Virginia and Washington, D.C., where interview participants are located, it is likely that biracial white-Asian women feel even more polarized in their racial identity. This could explain why it might be more difficult for a white-Asian woman living in Virginia or Washington, D.C., to embrace her racial identity or identify as a woman of color.

Unlike the interview participants, the photo participants came from all over the U.S., and some even lived abroad. This is more reflective of how place may influence identity, but again the small sample cannot be generalized.

Lastly, my own biracial white-Asian woman identity as a person and researcher may have impacted this study. Most participants were gathered through snowball

sampling or online groups for those who identify as white-Asian. In both cases, whether posting a call for participants online or through word-of-mouth recruitment, I openly identified as a white-Asian woman. Several participants assumed I shared experiences with them, and would sometimes even ask if that were the case or end statements with questions of their own, like “you know?” Because I am a white-Asian woman, participants may have felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with me, instead of someone who identified as a man or a racial identity different from their own. I believe this is particularly true for the photo portion, in which I asked women to submit photos of themselves for research purposes.

### **Implications for Further Research**

As discussed in chapter one, there is still little research on biracial individuals, particularly outside of those who are Black-white, and how they identify (Wilton, Sanchez & Garcia, 2013). A greater emphasis on all mixed race individuals and how they navigate their racial identity in the context of the Black-White Binary is critical to the field of study, both in terms of understanding what factors influence racial identity formation and how it may change over time at the individual level, and how race is policed in the U.S. and by whom at the interactional and structural levels. Because mixed race individuals may identify differently at various points of their life, a longitudinal study would be telling of what factors and life experiences may prompt these changes. Future research might also look at why white males/Asian females are the most common coupling in interracial marriages, and the implications of this on the racial identity of their children.

## **Conclusion**

This study began with a personal interest in learning more about how white-Asian women racially identify themselves, the factors that influence that identification, internal or external conflicts they've experienced related to their racial identity, and if they identify as women of color.

Six white-Asian women shared their experiences in semi-structured interviews. From their stories, several common themes emerged that exemplified how their race is questioned and perceived by others, and in turn, how those perceptions have affected their racial identity. Several of the participants did not talk about race with their families when growing up, leading to confusion about their racial identity. However, even if race was not discussed as a family unit, all of the women experienced others questioning and drawing conclusions about their racial identity. Almost all of the women remember being asked "What are you?" at some point in their lives, then facing fascination or doubt by the person asking about their racial identity. In some instances, the women were even asked to prove that they were Asian. These experiences, and at times bullying, would leave them with low self-esteem and feeling as if they could not claim one or both of their racial identities. Additionally, their physical appearances were subjected to examination and criticism by those doubting their racial identity. Several of the women discussed how their racial identity has changed over time. As children, they did not understand their racial identity because it was not discussed by the family. As they grew older and interacted with peers at school, it became quite clear that they were different for being biracial. Some of the women discussed checking "other" when classifying their

race before marking more than two races was an option. Now, they are more likely to check both white and Asian, with the exception of Christine who solely identifies herself as Asian on forms. Only two of the participants were hesitant about identifying as women of color. The other four participants identify as women of color, despite how their race might be perceived by others.

The nine women featured in the photo submission portion expressed common themes through their responses to “Who are you?” Similar to interview participants, several photo participants expressed feeling as if they fit in nowhere, based on their racial identity as white-Asian women. They too at times felt as if they were on the cusp of a culture, not fully belonging, but also not feeling completely white. Some participants embraced their racial identity as something unique to them. They viewed themselves as whole, instead of two halves. In addition to their racial identity, several other identities encompassed their full selves, such as being daughters, moms, and wives, or sharing their educational and professional pursuits. From their responses, it is evident that biracial white-Asian have much more to say in terms of their full identity, rather than leaving the conversation at “What are you?”

Though this study did have limitations, it contributed to the body of knowledge about racial identity formation in biracial white-Asian women. I found that the Black-White Binary, and its enforcement by others socially, is a major challenge faced by white-Asian women when forming their racial identity. The binary coupled with the Model Minority Myth places several stereotypes on the racial identities of white-Asian women. It is my hope that this work will be used to continue and expand upon the

conversation of mixed race identity in the U.S., and how the racial identity of biracial individuals is policed based on a racial binary that governs our society, both at the interactional and institutional levels.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Informed Consent**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to learn what factors affect the racial identity formation of white/Asian women, and the effects of that identity. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview in-person, via phone, or email for approximately 1-2 hours.

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in racial identity formation of Biracial white-Asian women.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All interviews will be conducted in private and data collected will not be connected to participants when shared in research findings. During and after the study, I will download the interviews to my computer with a password. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, and the crosslist of pseudonyms and identity will be kept on hard copy in a locked cabinet. All identifiable information will be destroyed within one to two years of the interviews. Data will be stored for five years.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

#### **CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Katherine Johnson Dias of the MAIS department at George Mason University. She may be reached at 757-470-8716 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Her faculty advisor, Angela Hattery, may be contacted at 703-992-2897. You may contact the George Mason University Institutional Review Board office at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Photo Informed Consent**

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to learn what factors affect the racial identity formation of white/Asian women, and the effects of that identity. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to submit a selfie or have your photo taken, and include a handwritten response to the prompt “Who are you?”

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in racial identity formation of white passing white/Asian women.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Submitted photos and responses will be published with the research. Your name will not be released, but there is the possibility of being identified based on your photo. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this research is open to adult women, aged 18 and up, who are biracial white-Asian. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

#### **CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Katherine Johnson Dias of the MAIS department at George Mason University. She may be reached at 757-470-8716 for questions or to report a research-related problem. Her faculty advisor, Angela Hattery, may be contacted at 703-992-2897. You may contact the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.



This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Questions**

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. How do you racially identify when asked to check your race on forms?
3. Do you identify more as white or Asian?
4. What is the race/ethnicity of your mother and father?
5. Were you born in the U.S.? Were your parents born in the U.S.? If not, where?
6. Did you grow up around other Asian family members? How frequently did you see them or interact?
7. How would you define white passing?
8. How have you experienced white passing? How does it feel?
9. Have you struggled with your racial identity or experienced conflict related to it?
10. Do you consider yourself a woman of color? Why/why not?
11. What factors have most influenced your racial identity and why? (ex. Family, friends, media, culture)
12. Why were those factors most important in your racial identity formation?

## REFERENCES

- Alcoff, L. M. (2003). Latino/as, Asian Americans, and the black-white binary. *The Journal of Ethics*, 7(1), 5-27.  
<http://dx.doi.org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.1023/A:1022870628484> Retrieved from  
<https://search-proquest-com.mutex.gmu.edu/docview/858947987?accountid=14541>
- Bernstein, M.; De la Cruz, M. (2009). What are you: Explaining identity as goal of the multiracial hapa movement. *Social Problems* 56(4), 722-745.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2004). From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial stratification in the USA. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 27(6), 931–950. <https://doi-org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.1080/0141987042000268530>
- Chao, M. M., Chiu, C.-y., Chan, W., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Kwok, C. (2013). The model minority as a shared reality and its implication for interracial perceptions. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 4(2), 84-92. doi:10.1037/a0028769
- Chong, V., & Kuo, B. C. H. (2015). Racial identity profiles of Asian-White biracial young adults: Testing a theoretical model with cultural and psychological correlates. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 6(3), 203-212.  
<http://dx.doi.org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.1037/aap0000022>
- Collins, J. F. (2000). Biracial Japanese American identity: An evolving process. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 6(2), 115-133. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.6.2.115
- Collins, P.H. (1990). *Black feminist thought : Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Curington, C. (2016). "Rethinking multiracial formation in the United States: Towards an intersectional approach." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2 (1):27-41.
- Cutter, M. J. (2016). "As white as most white women": Racial passing in advertisements for runaway slaves and the origins of a multivalent term. *American Studies* 54(4), 73-97. Mid-American Studies Association. Retrieved November 3, 2017, from Project MUSE database.

- Davenport, L. D. (2016). The role of gender, class, and religion in biracial Americans' racial labeling decisions. *American Sociological Review*, 81(1), 57-84.  
doi:10.1177/0003122415623286
- Fryer, R. G. (2007). Guess who's been coming to dinner? Trends in interracial marriage over the 20th century. *Journal Of Economic Perspectives*, 21(2), 71-90.
- Gullickson, A., Morning, A. (2011). Choosing race: Multiracial ancestry and identification, In *Social Science Research*, 40 (2), 498-512.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.12.010>.
- Kiang, L., Huynh, V. W., Cheah, C. S. L., Wang, Y., & Yoshikawa, H. (2017). Moving beyond the model minority. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, 8(1), 1-6.  
<http://dx.doi.org.mutex.gmu.edu/10.1037/aap0000070>
- Luibhéid, E. (2002). *Entry denied controlling sexuality at the border*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Poston, W. C. (1990). The biracial identity development model: A needed addition. *Journal Of Counseling & Development*, 69(2), 152.
- Qian, Z., & Lichter, D. T. (2011). Changing patterns of interracial marriage in a multiracial society. *Journal Of Marriage & Family*, 73(5), 1065-1084.  
doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2011.00866.x
- Root, M. P. (Ed.) (1996). *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781483327433
- Sanchez, D. T., & Bonam, C. M. (2009). To disclose or not to disclose biracial identity: The effect of biracial disclosure on perceiver evaluations and target responses. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 65(1), 129-149.
- Tolbert, K. (2016, September 22). From Hiroko to Susie: The untold stories of Japanese war brides. Retrieved June 13, 2018, from  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/09/22/from-hiroko-to-susie-the-untold-stories-of-japanese-war-brides/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.260cc8d2acec](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/09/22/from-hiroko-to-susie-the-untold-stories-of-japanese-war-brides/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.260cc8d2acec)
- Townsend, Sarah S. M. Being mixed: Who claims a biracial identity?. *Cultural diversity & ethnic minority psychology*. (2012) , 18 (1), p. 91 - 96.

- United States Census Bureau. (2010). Race and hispanic or latino: 2010. Retrieved from <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>
- Wilton, L., Sanchez, D., & Garcia, J. (2013). The stigma of privilege: Racial identity and stigma consciousness among biracial individuals. *Race and Social Problems*, 5(1), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-012-9083-5>
- Yamashiro, J. (2017). *Redefining Japaneseness : Japanese Americans in the ancestral homeland*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Katherine L. Johnson graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2014 with a degree in Mass Communications, with a focus on print and online journalism, and a minor in Political Science. She worked professionally in journalism and in higher education marketing/communications positions. Katherine graduates in May 2019 from George Mason University with her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Social Justice and Human Rights. She is an intersectional researcher with a feminist lens interested in race and gender, particularly biracialism, white passing, and racial identity formation. Johnson is pursuing her PhD in Sociology at North Carolina State University.