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“Check the Box”: Asian-White Biracial Identity among University Age Students

Hannah Brooke Hallenbeck
haha0216@colorado.edu

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“Check the Box”:
Asian-White Biracial Identity among University Age Students

By:
Hannah Hallenbeck
University of Colorado Boulder

A thesis submitted to the
University of Colorado Boulder
In partial fulfillment of the requirements to receive
Honors designation in
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Thesis Adviser:
Dr. Lori Peek, Sociology Department, Committee Chair

Committee Chairs:
Dr. Matthew Brown, Department of Sociology, Honors Program Supervisor
Dr. Nicolas Villanueva, Department of Ethnic Studies, Committee Member
ABSTRACT

This honors thesis examines how Asian-white biracial university age students identify in different institutional and social contexts. While biracial Asian-white individuals have been federally recognized in the United States since the 2000 Census, university annual diversity reports lag behind. At the university where I conducted research for this study, the institution places students who select multiple races into a homogeneous “more than one race” group (for the purposes of data analysis), which I argue fails to incorporate different racial, national, or cultural backgrounds, and self-presented identity. Through semi-structured interviews of 16 Asian-white biracial students and one campus employee of the university’s data analytics office, the diverse backgrounds of what it means to be both Asian and white and how their lived experiences of biraciality are represented is investigated. I found five influences on identity: ancestral immigrant status, phenotypic identity, demographic selection when presented with only one option, demographic selection when presented with two or more options, and self-identity in relation to cultural identity. This paper argues cultural identity is the most accurate representation of Asian-white biracial individuals, challenging literature that claims biracial individuals will embrace a singular dominant racial identity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank the Asian-white biracial students who let me interview them. Without their voices and perspectives, this research could not have been done.

Finally, thank you mom and dad for supporting my academic dreams and encouraging me do the research and studies I desire.
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Asian-white Biracial Identity among University Age Students:

I. INTRODUCTION

“I’m a banana,” Jonathan Jin-Soon Kim1 a male 21-year old Aerospace Engineering major with a South Korean father and white mother jokes, “yellow on the outside, white on the inside”. “I’m a bridge,” Nick Chung-Hee Brown, a male 19-year old geology major, the son of a South Korean mother and white father, says.

Jonathan, Nick, and the rest of the participants in this study are Asian-white biracial; neither one race nor the other but varying degrees of both. Yet the ‘more than one race’ question on demographic forms, the data reported by the Census, and diversity reports at the university where I conducted this study fail to capture those degrees of difference. The US Census, for instance, did not allow the selection of ‘more than one race’ until the year 2000. I was born in 1996, which means for 4 years, my family had to choose a single racial category for me. By the time I began completing applications for university admissions in 2013, in some instances I was able to select “other” and occasionally “more than one race” on the forms I was completing. However, even upon renewing my driver’s license at age 21, as I stood in the Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) line with my Asian mother, the best categories the attendant could offer me were ‘non-Hispanic’, just “Asian’, just ‘white’, or ‘unknown’. I was offended that even with my Asian birth mother standing next to me, someone asked if I’d like to describe myself on official documents as ‘unknown.’ My story is not unique.

This study seeks to illuminate how the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) Office of Data Analytics and Office of Admissions treat and report racial and ethnic categorizations and data in relation to how the Asian-white biracial students of this university self-identify. In other

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1 Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis.
words, I am interested in the structural categories for race used by this university and the
dynamic definitions of race offered by asking Asian-white biracial students who participated in
this study. In this thesis, I draw upon existing literature on biracial studies and census and
diversity reports for secondary analysis. I conduct semi-structured interviews of 16 Asian-white
biracial students and one semi-structured interview from a full-time employee of the Office of
Data Analytics.

Existing literature on biracial studies focuses on the challenge to the dominant US racial
hierarchy in which the black-white biracial mixed population challenges historic definitions of
race. After the landmark 1967 Supreme Court Ruling of *Loving v. Virginia* which legalized
exogamous relationships, (Duignan 2018) the definitions and boundaries of what it means to fit
into a racial category have continued to evolve, although such relationships—both by force and
consent—have always occurred.

W.E.B. DuBois predicted that the primary social issues of the US in the 20th century
would revolve around problems of the color line. Dubois was most often referring to the black-
white hierarchy. New waves of immigrant groups have created an increasingly diverse
population, but where universities such as this one divide diversity into eight categories for
individuals to self-identify. This question of identity and representation creates the landscape for
discussion of hegemonic white identities, minority Asian identities, and subgroup Asian-white
biracial identities. Biracial Asian-white individuals must identify with and traverse socially
defined racial categories that have not allowed multiracial people to self-identify in the Census
before 2000 and at the university level before 2011.

From 2002-2011, the university of study divided fall enrollment diversity headcount by
race/ethnicity for degree-seeking enrollment into the four categories of American Indian, Latino,
African American, and Asian American. In total demographic reports, white/unknown and international were also added (University of Colorado 2002).

In the 2011-2012 diversity report, the demographic categories included: Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, and “more than one race” (University of Colorado 2017). According to the data I was able to access, the “more than one race” respondents do not mark off which races they are that constitute “more than one race”. At the University, all students who are “more than one race” are categorized into the same group as students with every other combination of racial background. All of the participants are students at the University of Colorado Boulder and have filled out the Common Application demographics form, contributing to the annual diversity reports. This is potentially problematic, as bi-racialism between Black-white and Asian-white may involve different lived racialized experiences.

Biracial identity at the university of study is context specific as this is a predominantly white university that does not have designated physical spaces, student groups, or clubs for mixed race individuals who may feel like an outsider or “not Asian enough” or “not white enough” for monoracial organizations. Additionally, this subgroup of the biracial population identifies differently than other biracial groups as they have more flexibility, dependent on if they are ‘white passing’ or have different social responses and stereotypes. As the university only started allowing the option of selecting more than one race for the applicants of the 2011-2012 academic year, reports may not be accurate until the incoming class of 2015 assuming four year graduation rates. Only the incoming student demographics are recorded meaning the already enrolled students that began previous to the 2011-2012 academic year were not accurately represented.
II. THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of this thesis revolves around race and ethnic theories, with an emphasis on the gap in knowledge surrounding this growing Asian-white demographic group. This section looks at critical race theory and recent literature on biracial studies to see if the demographic categorization is accurately representative of the identities of Asian-white biracial individuals and what is the most significant contributor to their identity formation process.

A. Social Construction of Race

Race in the US is constantly being redefined as it is a social construct. Laws help reinforced normative white hegemonic ideas, turning political motivations into enacted laws, rules, and regulation. Changing social definitions of race are seen in how the US Census categorizes and orders groups of people. If the category does not exist, that group of people is socially unrecognized and unable to self-identity. “The US Census obviously prefers “pure” races to mixed and multiple affiliations,” (Pearlman and Waters 2002: 265). However, assumptions are based on the bizarre assumption that there will be no further intermixing of people across racial lines. This shows how the US is still creating a framework built on the foundation of white colonialism, slavery, emancipation, and immigration (Roedigger 2008). By historically only having defined single-race categories, the Census legitimizes single race categories and fails to recognize the existence and lived experiences of multiracial people. “It is estimated that in the post-civil rights era, approximately half of all U.S-born Chinese and Japanese Americans are married to whites” (Jacobs & Labov 1995, Williamson-Leon & Nakashima 2001: 26). However, “over the 1980-1990 period, rates of intermarriage appear to have declined for Asian Americans, dropping to 14.5 percent,” (Kabria 2002: 168).
Specifically, “they [the projections branch of the Census Bureau] assume that a child born to an interracial couple today will take the race of the mother and that, starting tomorrow, neither that child or any other American child will marry across lines,” (Pealmann 2000: 524-525). While this study is not asking about possible further racial intermixing, it does seek to deconstruct the ‘purity’ of race and answer if the prescribed identities are representative to multiracial students. These socially defined classifications are intentionally implemented to restrict nonwhite Americans of legal, social, and economic rights (Roediger 2008).

By looking at a comparison of Census categories and the corresponding political configurations of the time, it is clear that white people are the creators of the categories. A lack of communication between the ascribing and ascribed groups shows the social dominance and lack of dialogue regarding self-identification. This study seeks to see if the university ascribed categories are internalized identities of the people they are meant to count or if they oppress people who are only half white.

B. Critical Race Theory and Hegemonic Power

Critical race theory offers a framework or lens to examine how whiteness is hegemonic in US society and how it structures society into social hierarchies. Whiteness can be configured into meanings and practices that simultaneously produce and maintain racial cohesion (Hughey 2010). Regardless of the level of social prestige, the hegemonic power reinforces the definition and boundaries of racial categories and who belongs to them. These hierarchies inform how demographic data is constructed and presented, regardless of the self-identity of them groups of people it is meant to describe. Through this framework, the categories of the US Census and university’s annual diversity reports are socially constructed categories.
Opposingly, McIntosh (1988) provides a framework in which the racial hegemonic powers of the whiteness of a socially dominant group are realized. Like her metaphor of the ‘invisible knapsack”, the social power and privilege associated with their location within the racial hierarchy is unrealized and unintentionally acted upon. Through this framework, those who create demographic categories may be unaware of the existence of the differences in multiracialism or how these categories impact identity, especially for multiracial individuals.

This thesis engages the idea of the dominant culture of multiracial individuals and can argue that multiracial individuals do identify similarly to white individuals. I seek to study if biracial people engage their white half on a daily basis as an ‘invisible’ or consciously privileged part of their identity as well as if this identity is used for personal gain upon their discretion.

As a public state university, the Office of Data Analytics must outwardly and freely report all diversity and enrollment statistics. However, the structure must only comply with the National Center for Education Statistics federally mandated Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) requirements (US Department of Education 2018). Unlike the US Census, these requirements do not require public universities to report subgroups. While the division “more than one race” is an officially reported category, there are no subdivisions within it such as “Asian-white” or “Asian-other”.

A critical race theory lens might argue that dominant groups do not feel the need to take the time and effort to represent people as they wish to be represented in the data, even through appendixes. Group categories are not impacted by the social repercussions of lack of representation and therefore have no need to change their categorization scheme. The university collects the information but refrains from posting it, citing lack of interest and unnecessary work, according to the data analytics employee I interviewed. Additionally, “from the point of view of
the dominant group, racial distinctions are a necessary tool of dominance. They serve to separate the subordinate people as Other. Putting simple, neat labels on dominated peoples-and creating negative myths about the moral qualities of those people-makes it easier for the dominators to ignore the individual humanity of their victims. It eases the guilt of oppression,” (Root 1992:19). By not allowing biracial individuals to self-identify, regardless of Asian-white or other racial mixing, these groups are being oppressed. This study seeks to answer if Asian-white biracial university students feel this way, or if they feel represented and therefore valued as a demographic population.

C. Asian American Identity and the Model Minority Myth

Asian American identity is part of the Asian-white biracial existence. Literature describes how the Asian American population co-exists with immigrant ideology and stereotypes of the ‘model minority’. Due to the dualism of identity of this study’s participants, Asian American identity is important to examine. In order to understand pan-Asian American identity, the history of immigration must be discussed. The first wave of immigration was in the early 1900s and was predominantly Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Pilipino migrant workers (Lee 2015). These populations faced the extreme exclusionary policies, like the 1904 Chinese Exclusion Act, 1924 Immigration Act, and Quota system (Lee 2015) that set a precedent for racial formation in the US. Asian migration was limited until the 1965 Immigration Act abolished the quota system. Though it targeted professionals such as doctors and scientists, which contributed to the model minority myth, this act could not foresee the changes to the Asian American population. Asian American is used throughout this paper with acknowledgement of the University of California Berkeley Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) rejecting the colonialist term “oriental” to self-identify as Asian American.
Asian American identity lumps in all nations, cultures, and religions from Eastern Asia, Southeastern Asia, South Asia, as well as India and Pakistan. The phrase Asian American usually brings to mind someone who is Chinese-American or phenotypically lighter skinned (Hall 2003). Demographic forms usually group all of the aforementioned subgroups into the umbrella term “Asian”, occasionally breaking that down further into regions or countries. The 2010 Census did include many subcategories of Asian not previously included, showing the social progress and changing immigrant populations.

The live CommonApp, or college application portal, creates subsections under racial categories including: China, India, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam, Other East Asia, Other South Asia, and Other Southeast Asia. While more options allow for a more accurate representation of self-identity, it does not allow for the nuanced social history for those who identify with Taiwan. Additionally, the lumping of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) under ‘Other Southeast Asian’ continues to nullify those voices and identities. This homogenizes the data and ignores the reasoning for allowing an individual to select more than one race.

Contrasting literature focuses on how Asian Americans have a higher social status than other minorities alongside discussions of the myth of how the model minority is harmful for these communities. The model minority praises Asian Americans for assimilating to the broader American culture and making higher incomes through more prestigious white-collar occupations. “Emerging in the 1960s, the model-minority myth arose as an effective tool for legitimating dismantling of affirmative action and welfare programs in the conservative 1980s” (Bascara 2006: 42). Using this stereotype allows continued lack of social effort for social equality.
The biracial experience gives the flexibility of the individual to display and hide identities for purposes such as affirmative action. Like the ongoing Harvard Lawsuit cases in which Asian Americans are suing Harvard’s Admissions Office for racially profiling applications against Asian Americans (NBC News 2019), even opinions on affirmative actions within the Asian American community are conflicted. Affirmative action is seen as both helpful and limiting in the admission into prestigious universities. Some Asian Americans feel that they should be considered strictly regarding academics and involvement while others feel that racial quotas of schools allows for a more balanced experience (NBC News 2019). Asian-white biracial students, however, have the flexibility to identify with one race over the other on applications, not being dishonest, but selectively using their dual status to their perceived benefit in a time when race is a consideration for admissions departments to address historic injustice.

i. Asian-Indian Americans

The Indian American population is important to mention in the context of this study. Asian Indian communities are often separate from the pan-Asian American populations because “[i]n the Indian culture, identity is more ascribed by birth, family, community, caste, status, and religion than by achievement. The ascribed identity tends to restrict choices open to the individual and, to a large extent, tends to be the reflection of the familial and social norms of expectations. Personal interests, goals, welfare, and glory are secondary to those of the family”, (Jacob 2017: 26). This is also contradictory to the myth of meritocracy of East Asian Americans and American exceptionalism. India is predominantly Hindu and has a social caste system which could not be translated into an American society as white American tradition does not ascribe to it. However, the most distinguishing factor of this community is the phenotypic expressions in which Asian-Indian Americans are distinguishable from other Asian Americans. Because of
colorism and the racial hierarchy in the US, which Asian-Indian Americans are treated differently from Asian Americans.

D. Identity

Identity formation is dependent on a multitude of factors, including but not limited to upbringing, phenotypic portrayal, and social setting. “Identity is negotiated-formed, maintained, and modified- through our interactions with others” (Hecht 1993:). Identity also simultaneously influences those very interactions through our expectations and perceptions of others’ behaviors” (Hecht 1993:). This provides a conceptual framework in which biracial identity can be analyzed: through the analysis of self-reflected interactions with others. How Asian-white students think others racially categorize them can determine if they feel a need to self-identity a certain way.

Interactions with others is broad and can be constructed into interview questions about earliest memories of race, defining childhood memories, construction of religious and cultural identity, experiences of adversity, bullying and stereotyping, and perceptions of how others racially perceive study participants.

Pathology outside of a medical context can refer to abnormalities in the social sphere. Other existing literature describes the “lingering paradigm of pathology in which so-called multiracial person is pathologized if she asserts a multiracial identity” (Dalmage 2004: 104). This ‘abnormality’ can be viewed within a social construction framework that seeks to push multiracial individuals into one racial and cultural category and retaliate when not achieved.

Existing literature’s offers solutions to these so called social pathologies through analysis of “biracialism as a singular identity”, “biracial as a border identity: exclusively biracial”, “protea identity: multiple identities”, and “a transcendent identity: beyond race” (Dalmage 2004:
126-130). Similar to Khanna’s 2004 study, these solutions are to categorize biracial people into these new categories.

Other literature delves into other methods of biracial identity development. Khanna (2004) reported that reflected appraisals were important in shaping racial identity in multiracial Asian-white individuals and that how they believed they were perceived by others influenced their racial identities. In a study using qualitative survey data taken from 110 Asian-White adults, Khanna found that two factors exerted the strongest influence on their racial identities; the reflected appraisals of others regarding “(1) their physical appearance, as well as their (2) cultural knowledge and exposure.”

Other literature claims the association of phenotypic expression with identity (Khanna 2004). “If self-identification is taken as a basic principle, there are no grounds for recording a multirace person to a single race,” (Edmonston, Goldstein and Lott 1996: 38). Using this theoretical framework, all multiracial variations are valid yet unrecorded. I wish to understand the self-described identities

E. Biracial Studies

Biracial studies often focus on the black-white racial divide after the US 1967 repeal of miscegenation laws. Due to generations of racial segregation and the one-drop rule, “starting in the 1970s, theorists began to take the Equivalent Approach, assuming that healthy biracial individuals undergo racial identity development processes similar to those of monoracial minorities” (Porterfield, 1978). It assumes being any part of a minority groups dominates biracial identity. This literature focuses overwhelmingly on the context of black-white families, not any other racial mixture. As Asian-white families do not have the same history of slavery and the de jure and de facto one-drop rule, the treatment cannot be assumed to be the equivalent approach.
It cannot be assumed that Asian-white biracial persons will identify as Asian or necessarily try to “pass” as white. This study looks to add to this sparse literature and to discover self-defined and socially ascribed identities.

This history of assigning biracial children one identity continues with “. . . hypodescent laws, biracial babies with a white parent were assigned the racial status of the nonwhite parent. Since 1989, the new standing policy directs that all infants are given the same race as their mothers” (Waters 1994, Willaimson-Leon and Nakashima 2001: 29). Again, this literature is focused on black-white families. The influences of recent familial immigration and the social history of slavery create different social stratum and lived experiences for the classification of US races. As such, the data in this thesis will reveal if this theoretical framework will be applicable to a different group of biracial Americans. Although there are social claims that the US is currently in a ‘post-race’ (Jorde 2002) or a melting-pot society in which equality has been achieved, it was only in the 2000 that the Census began allowing multiracial people to be able to identify all of their races. This illustrates that social change has occurred, but also how slow it has been to come.

Khanna claims the association of phenotypic expression with identity (2004). “If self-identification is taken as a basic principle, there are no grounds for recording a multirace person to a single race” (Edmonston, Goldstein and Lott 1996: 38). Using this theoretical framework, all multiracial variations are valid yet unrecorded. In this thesis, I work to understand the self-described identities.

The literature also provides a theory of situational “protean” identity in which identity is dependent on the context in which the person is in (Khanna 2004). The state, city, and university racial communities influence the context for the individual to identify. These communities
decide for the individual in many ways, the bounds and possibilities of identity; looking at phenotypic expression and classifying the individual. “We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is. The fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially “mixed” or of an ethnic/racial group we are not familiar with. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning” (Omi and Winant 1992: 59). This crisis has appeared in allowing demographic forms multiple options, but also in the treatment of these people. Are they accepted into white American culture or into Asian culture?

Belonging both racially and culturally is a challenge of this group. “Since others would most likely not see or accept an Asian-white child as ‘fully Asian,’ the child would also not be presumed to have authentic ethnicity. In other words, the racialized assumption that often marked my informants’ own experiences—that they had true and genuine ties to and knowledge of an ethnic collectivity—might not be present,” (Kibria 2002: 179). I challenge this notion; if Asian-white biracial individuals identify with one culture, their ties allow them to identify with that group. “Ethnic symbols are abstracted from the older ethnic culture, and later-generation ethnics draw on these symbols as ‘easy and intermittent ways’ of expressing their ethnicities (Gans 1979: 8)”. Someone does not have to exhibit every symbol of a culture to belong to it. In the case of Asian-white biracial individuals, they may draw from whatever ethnic symbol is most important to them, as long as it is internalized and authentic. Identity is both a reflection of the social atmosphere but also an internalized fact.

Some existing literature claims that biracial identity formation has no correlation with phenotypic expression (Hall 1980) however, the Hall study looked at Asian-black individuals in London and may not be comparative to Asian-whites as the historical injustices regarding black
people and different phenotypic expressions. Additionally, the treatment of people of African
descent in England and US are different levels of social acceptability after a slavery
emancipation era.

E. Demographic Context

Individuals who identify as more than one race or multiracial represent a small but
growing segment of the US. In the 2010 US census data, 8,265,318 individuals or 2.7% of the
population selected “two races”. Of that, 1,623,234 individuals, or 0.5% of the US population,
selected “white; Asian”, a subcategory of “two races” (U.S Census 2010). However, this is for
people who chose to identify as such, and does not include people who do not know, or identify
with one race/ethnicity more than another (Samuels 2017). Like the US census, when applying to
University of Colorado Boulder, henceforth referred to as CU, prospective students are asked to
use “The Common Application” in which they fill out demographic information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>N of students indicating Asian ethnicity</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>N Asian/ White/ Asian/ White/ N (Asian only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>24,757</td>
<td>1,893</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>24,192</td>
<td>1,963</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>24,426</td>
<td>2,066</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>26,433</td>
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<td>918</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>27,065</td>
<td>3,761</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>28,756</td>
<td>4,925</td>
<td>1,797</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1, retrieved from the Office of Data Analytics 11/6/18

Figure 1, received upon request of to the Office of Data Analytics at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU) shows
how of the current 2018 enrollment of 28,756 undergraduate students, 780 individuals identify as
Asian/white only meaning those people chose to click solely the boxes ‘Asian’ and ‘white’. This
group represents 2.71% of the student population, compared to 0.5% of the US population, (US Census 2010).

Though a study of 15 qualitative interviews cannot generalize the US or entire university, it can reveal the duality of not just the student identities, but the challenges in creating the categories themselves. Identity can change in regards to perceptions about admittance, through college experience and engagement, and existing literature does not ask if these categories conceptualize identity correctly. Do these ascribed titles fit the people they are meant to identify? This is one of the questions this study seeks to answer.
III. METHODS

This project draws upon qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 biracial Asian-white students and one university employee. I also conducted descriptive analysis of secondary data from the University of Colorado Boulder’s annual Diversity Report, with a focus on Asian-white statistics, to put the study in broader context.

A. IRB

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is required for all research involving human subjects. In order to study Asian-white biracial students, I submitted a university-required project protocol, a consent form (see Appendix 2), question guide (see Appendix 3) and demographic information form (see Appendix 4) and supporting resource document (see Appendix 5). I received initial approval on 9/25/2018. In the subsequent weeks, I submitted an amendment with a recruitment flyer (see Appendix 6), a separate interview guide for University employees (see Appendix 7) and University employee consent form (see Appendix 8). After the IRB approved my necessary documents on 9/25/2018, I began to recruit participants for open-ended, semi-structured interviews.

B. Recruitment

A detailed timeline of the recruitment and project stages can be found as Appendix 1. Briefly, to begin recruiting students for this study, the first approach I used was to ask friends who I knew fit the study criteria to participate. I found six participants through my immediate friend networks.

From there, I began to rely on snowball sampling (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011:100). I identified an additional seven participants through snowball sampling.
A third way I sought participants for this study was through a mass email message. On 10/1/2018, an advisor for the Ethnic Studies Department, Political Science Department, and International Affairs Department sent out an invitation which I had drafted, that led me to identify one additional participant. I also sent out a recruitment message to the Asian cultural and social organizations on campus including but not limited to the Japanese Student Association, Nepalese Student Association, South Asian Student Association, Asian Unity, and Asian American Intervarsity. These messages were distributed through Facebook, website contact request submission, and email. That method yielded no direct responses.

In order to try and increase the number of participants in my study, I submitted an amendment to the IRB in order to distribute an approved flyer for recruitment. Once approved, I hung the flyer in community spaces and student organization spaces. This did not yield any participants.

C. Student Interviews

I continued to recruit students for this study as I began the interview process. Once I had identified a potential participant, I verified his or her eligibility in terms of my inclusion criteria for this study (the person had to be a student and to have one Asian and one white parent), and then worked to schedule an interview as soon as the person was available.

I began each interview by introducing myself and the study. From there, we reviewed the consent form. After that, I gathered signatures and asked for verbal consent to use an audio recorder. Only then did I begin the interviews.

During the interviews, I memoed on the interview question guide, making notes for the transcription and after-interview notes. I also wrote down things that stood out or did not necessarily fit on the question guide. This helped me to listen to each interviewee's story and to
follow up on key pieces of information accordingly. After completing the first four interviews, I submitted an amendment to the IRB approved question guide (Appendix 1- approved on 10/22/2018) in order to include additional questions about food, culture, travel, and stereotypes. These were all topics that contribute to cultural and racial identity and came up repeatedly and organically in the early interviews, so I wanted to capture the questions on the guide.

I personally transcribed the first four interviews that I conducted. Given the time and effort in transcribing and the tight timeline of this thesis, I then used the Amazon transcription service for the remaining interviews. Although some qualitative research relies on notes, I was intent on having verbatim transcriptions to allow for a more accurate understanding of the conversations (Hennink et al 2001). After having the audio transcribed, I read through each transcript for computer errors or other issues. See Table 1 for a summary of interview information including the date, length of interview, and location. As summarized in the table, I conducted 16 interviews between September 28, 2018 and January 25, 2019. The interviews lasted an average of 50:43 minute and were held in the locations determined to be mutually agreeable between me and the interviewee.
### Table 1: Asian-white Student Interview Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Interview Length</th>
<th>Interview Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, Tina Kaho Green</td>
<td>9/28/18</td>
<td>75:25</td>
<td>Apartment Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, Roger Hyung-Seok Williams</td>
<td>10/02/18</td>
<td>44:43</td>
<td>Dining Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, Noah Jin-Soon Kim</td>
<td>10/05/18</td>
<td>44:07</td>
<td>Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, Tisha Miranda Smith</td>
<td>10/05/18</td>
<td>62:52</td>
<td>Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, Emma Marie Ren</td>
<td>10/11/18</td>
<td>60:48</td>
<td>Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, Jack Chung-Hee Brown</td>
<td>10/16/18</td>
<td>83:17</td>
<td>Apartment Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, Jonas O’Toole</td>
<td>11/02/18</td>
<td>61:15</td>
<td>Apartment Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, Wyatt Baker</td>
<td>11/05/18</td>
<td>42:35</td>
<td>Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, Elisabeth Brown</td>
<td>11/09/18</td>
<td>46:53</td>
<td>Engineering Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, Kayla Anderson</td>
<td>11/09/18</td>
<td>40:33</td>
<td>Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, Emily Hiroka Blake</td>
<td>11/13/18</td>
<td>45:22</td>
<td>Engineering Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, Jace Jae-Sun Ferguson</td>
<td>11/15/18</td>
<td>53:12</td>
<td>Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13, Samantha Evans</td>
<td>11/26/18</td>
<td>38:47</td>
<td>Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, Andrea Evans</td>
<td>11/29/18</td>
<td>59:08</td>
<td>Dining Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, Neal Goda Morgan</td>
<td>11/30/18</td>
<td>55:17</td>
<td>Apartment Commons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16, Arjun Ramakrishnan Olsen</td>
<td>1/25/18</td>
<td>84:58</td>
<td>Student Union</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Student Demographic Information

At the close of the interview, I gave each respondent a demographic information form that I asked them to complete. Table 2 displays the demographics of the 8 male and 8 female
Asian-white biracial students who participated in this study. All were undergraduate students at the same institution, and all were above the age of 18.

Table 2 summarizes the Asian ethnic background and the gender of the parent (mother of father) of Asian descent. As shown in the table, 13 participants’ mothers were Asian while three fathers were Asian. The table includes further information about the specific nationality of the participants’ Asian parent as well as information about the student.

Table 2: Asian-white Biracial Student Interviewee Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #, Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Asian Parents’ Ethnicity</th>
<th>Which Parent</th>
<th>University Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Self-Identity as stated during the in-depth interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, Tina Kaho Green</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Film Studies</td>
<td>Half-Japanese, Half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, Roger Hyung-Seok Williams</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, Tisha Miranda Smith</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Psychology, Political Science</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, Half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, Emma Marie Ren</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MCDB, Computer Science</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, Half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, Jack Chung-Hee Brown</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Geology</td>
<td>Half-Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, Jonas O’Toole</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Taiwanese/Chinese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Applied Math, Computer Science</td>
<td>Majority White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, Wyatt Baker</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Graduated May ‘18</td>
<td>Neuroscience</td>
<td>Half-Japanese, Half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Parental Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, Elisabeth Brown</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Filipina</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Applied Math</td>
<td>White, Pacific Islander, Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, Kayla Anderson</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>CMCI</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, Emily Hiroka Blake</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering, Applied Math</td>
<td>Half-Asian, Half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12, Jace Jae-Sun Ferguson</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Astrophysics</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13, Samantha Evans</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Applied Math</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14, Andrea Evans</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Economics, Data Analytics</td>
<td>Half-Asian, half-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15, Neal Goda Morgan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Biological, Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16, Arjun Ramakrishnan Olsen</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Half-Indian, Half-white</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 summarizes the participants’ Asian parents’ ethnicity.
D. **Employee Interview and Demographic Information**

When I had initially envisioned this study, I had hoped to interview employees at the university who worked in admissions and worked with data collection and analysis surrounding student demographics. After multiple repeated attempts to contact employees in relevant offices, including an in-person visit to the University Admissions and sending multiple emails over three months, I was unsuccessful in securing an interview through that office.

I then turned to my professional contacts in the Careers Services Office and was able to complete one interview with a university employee who works in the Office of Data Analytics and has access to racial demographic data. Table 3 below summarizes information about the interviewee and the interview.

![Figure 2: Asian Parent Ethnicity](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Length of Employment at the University</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Interview Length</th>
<th>Interview Location</th>
<th>Job Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>11/06/18</td>
<td>37:35</td>
<td>Office of Data Analytics</td>
<td>Assistant Director, Senior IR Analyst</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For this interview, I drew on a separate interview guide that was designed specifically to learn from university employees about the construction and use of racial demographic categories at the university. This interview lasted nearly 40 minutes but did not yield a great deal of information as many of the categories the university uses are “pre-fixed” and widely used in various settings.

E. Data Preparation, Coding the Data, and Data Analysis

As a first step to begin my analyses, I proof read all transcripts. I then began to hand code the transcripts through a process using color coding to capture general themes. Initially, I looked for the themes associated with the questions I asked. Some themes quickly became apparent contributors related to identity; decision making, upbringing, and university enrollment. I then began to group these themes into categories that helped explain how they influenced the individuals’ identity. I also developed a code book to cross reference and organize the printed transcript colored markings and symbols for organization and standardization across transcripts (Hennink et al 2011).

The process I used in this work is referred to as inductive code development, where I looked for common themes between interviewees that crossed gender and socioeconomic statuses (Hennink et al 2011). This helped me to identify additional codes related to family roles, food, language, travel, and ‘othering’. I operationalized othering is the social push-back away from the normative group. Other codes included the number of generations the family has been in the US. This was grouped under the theme ‘ancestral timeline’ as discussed in the Data Analysis section. Though these interviews were rich in codes, “code development typically stops… when no more issues are identified in the data” (Hennink et al 2011:217). Accordingly, I reviewed the data until I could find no more commonalities between transcripts.
Once I had reached code saturation, then I began analytic comparisons (Hennink et al 2011) in which subgroups of the study population, such as Asian-white biracial individuals who had an Asian father, were compared to the respondents with an Asian mother. In order to create theory, I had to look at the broader context in which this is happening, such as the changing demographics of biracialism in the US.

To place this research in broader sociological, university-based, and US context, I reviewed relevant literature and secondary data sources both prior to and while I was coding the data. Based on my reading of the literature and review of the data, it seemed that there might be two logical ways to organize the data. First, I considered using a life course analysis and exploring influential experiences between childhood, adolescence, and college (see Peek 2005). Many of the participants in my study recalled childhood experiences during their interviews in which their race was introduced to them for the first time. Similarly, three participants talked about elementary and middle school bullying which resulted in them either embracing or distancing themselves from the Asian half of their identity. College was also a marker in the change of identities, which ranged on changing demographics in order to gain more social resources, or being forced to select only one identity, or the ability to take classes about their language or in some way celebrate the Asian half.

The second method to group the data drew on Khanna’s 2008 study in which biracial individuals were grouped into Asian-Dominant or white-dominant. I initially categorized participants into these groups but realized I was the new oppressive force, like the university or US Census, removing their choices and voices; instead placing them into what I deemed most logical for my purposes. After discussing this quandary with my adviser and re-reviewing my various codes, I chose to separate identity out into 5 different categories with only one of which
the participants did not assign themselves. This, I believe, allows the authentic voice of the participants to still shine through, while also affording me the opportunity to provide a sociological analysis.

As I conducted my analysis, I also continued to return to dominant themes, revolving primarily around family structure, focusing on which parent is Asian and how strong the ties are to the Asian parent’s culture, language, and family. Food was a connector to the Asian culture, even in situations where the study participant is a third generation American without knowledge of the language or culture of the Asian nation their ancestry originates from.

\textit{F. Secondary Data Collection and Quantitative Analysis}

In addition to the qualitative, contextual data I collected, I also conducted secondary data analysis of the university’s annual diversity reports. These were first issued with the biracial option in the 2011-2012 academic year and continue to be released annually (Figure 1, page 19). I used this university-level information to compare with US Census data of the same population and time range. I also requested specific data on only Asian-white identifying students from the Office of Data Analytics (Figure 3) to compare the demographics of my 16 study participants.
In any qualitative study, it is important to identify one’s positionality. I am an Asian-white biracial student, and hence I shared a primary biracial identity with the people I was studying. Some scholars argue that when the researchers share the same identity as the participants, that can help with building rapport (Hennink et al 2011) through sharing lived experiences or receiving similar microaggressions. During the interviews, I asked “can you tell what I am,” to test how the interviewees might project their identity onto others, their awareness of Asian-white biracialism, and to build rapport. This question also revealed how they feel about pan-Asian identity. My shared identity as a student also helped me to recruit fellow students and made me comfortable to approach university staff in the recruitment process.

One of the methodological difficulties with belonging to the group that I studied is that I could make assumptions based off my own lived experiences. My study seeks to look at how this
group of people relate and identify according to how they are represented, but as such, I cannot perpetuate or reinforce the stereotypes. The interview guide was designed to help me steer away from guiding questions, and I regularly met with my academic advisor and mentors to check and process what I was learning.

I have learned how important it is to be reflexive of my identity and positionality as I was raised in a middle class, suburban neighborhood by married heterosexual parents. All of the Asian-white biracial individuals I have met before starting this study have also been of similar sociodemographic backgrounds. Methodologically, it has been important for me to reflect in this way to try to limit my assumptions and to ensure that I was never guiding participants to answer questions as if there was a ‘right or wrong’ answer.

Reflexivity also influenced how I worded questions on my interview guide and in the context of the actual interviews. I was careful to not assume any upbringings, family structures, or socio-economic privileges or disadvantages. Reflexivity is critical in reflecting on the entire research process, not only the interviews (Hsiung 2010).

I worked to put my research into the broader US context including considering the ways that census data is categorized and exploring trends regarding the rapid growth of biracialism. I asked each participant if they had anything that was not explored during the interview that they wished to share with me. All the interviewees did add something additional they wanted to talk about, which I hope speaks to the rapport we built in the interview process.
IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Identity is both internal, in that it involves how we think about ourselves, and also external, in that it is fluid and influenced by surrounding social settings, family history, and internalization of others’ perceptions. In conducting the interviews for this honors thesis, all of the participants shared that they had been forced to decide how they fill out demographic forms as well as decide if they are willing to select “other”, one race over the other, or not fill out the question at all. Similarly, 14 of the study participants reported that they had been asked the question, “what are you?” in various forms.

In the case of biracial Asian-white individuals in this study, I found that their identities were shaped by various external forces, but also by their own heritage and lineage. Specifically, I also found how fluid identity can be, and identified five major factors shaping identity assertions among the participants: the ancestral immigrant, phenotypic identity, demographic selections, cultural identity, and self-identity all contribute to how the individuals identify themselves. Table 4 summarizes the categories that I discovered, through the in-depth interviews, which intersect to form individual identity. The table, when read moving from left to right, begins with identity categories considered more static, and then moves to more situational identities. Kibria (2002: 178) speaks to identity as a fluid structure and argues that “[a]mong the advantages was a certain flexibility in identity, an ability to successfully resist being pinned down and so forced to choose one identity over another one. On the other hand, this same ability had the disadvantages of identity confusion and marginality.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number, Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ancestral Immigrant of Asian Descent</th>
<th>Phenotypic Identity</th>
<th>Demographic Identity with Only 1 Option Available</th>
<th>Demographic Identity as Selected when 2 or More Options are Available</th>
<th>Self-Identity</th>
<th>Cultural Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, Tina Kaho Green</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Japanese, white</td>
<td>Half-Japanese, Half-white</td>
<td>Mixed Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2, Roger Hyung-Seok Williams</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Korean, white</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3, Noah Jin-Soon Kim</td>
<td>Great-Grandparents</td>
<td>“white enough”</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>White, Asian</td>
<td>Half-Korean, Half-white</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, Tisha Miranda Smith</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mixed, she is unsure</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Chinese, white</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, Half-white</td>
<td>Mixed Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, Emma Marie Ren</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Chinese, white</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, Half-white</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6, Jack Chung-Hee Brown</td>
<td>Mother (age 6)</td>
<td>“ambiguous”/Korean</td>
<td>white or Asian</td>
<td>Korean, white</td>
<td>Half-Korean</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7, Jonas Michael O’Toole</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Chinese, white</td>
<td>Majority White</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, Wyatt Baker</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>Asian, white. Sometimes only white</td>
<td>Half-Japanese, Half-white</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, Elisabeth Brown</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>“ambiguous”, tan white</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>white, Pacific Islander, Filipina</td>
<td>White, Pacific Islander, Asian</td>
<td>Jewish American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, Kayla Anderson</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Not entirely white</td>
<td>Other, if no other Asian white</td>
<td>Taiwanese, white</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, Emily Hiroka Blake</td>
<td>Great Grandparents</td>
<td>Ambiguous, but not white</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Asian, white</td>
<td>Half-Asian, Half-white</td>
<td>white American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Race Description</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Race Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Jace Jae-Sun Ferguson</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Asian, white</td>
<td>Asian, white, white American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Samantha Evans</td>
<td>Great Grandparents, great-great Grandparents</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asian, white</td>
<td>Half-Chinese, half-white, white American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Andrea Evans</td>
<td>Great Grandparents, great-great Grandparents</td>
<td>Not white, Hispanic</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Half-Asian, half-white, white American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Neal Goda Morgan</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mixed Equal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A.  *Ancestral Immigrant*

Ancestral immigrant refers to which family member(s) of the participant immigrated to the United States from Asia and how many generations ago that occurred. This is important due to the historical context of the migration, the strength of the relationship to an Asian nation as well as how key cultural identity components are passed down and distilled over time.

Ethnic boundaries and distilled ethnicity describe how generational time in the U.S. influences identity through the creation of Asian cultural identity. Ethnic boundaries involve the ‘perceived common ancestry, the perception of a shared history of some sort, and shared symbols of peoplehood’ (Cornell & Hartman 1998: 32). A claim to these ethnic boundaries is dependent on how assimilated the ancestral immigrant is/was. This is turn creates the “distilled ethnicity, in which ethnic culture and identity are pared of nonessential components down to their core essence,” (Kibria 2002: 160). For an Asian parent in the US, they are surrounded by the white dominant culture and are competing to represent an Asian ethnicity. As such, only “distilled ethnicity” is passed on as complete Asian cultural immersion would be impossible in the suburban context and this is especially true in the case of marriage to a non-Asian individual. The strength of the distilled ethnicity determines how connected an individual is to their family’s Asian identity. The passing of distilled ethnicity to Asian-white biracial individuals is not the only factor. Explained differently, “. . . assimilation is seen as linear and racially blind process whereby, as each generation becomes further removed from their original immigrants, the salience of ethnicity and its meaning in their lives weakens” (Gordon 1964, Tuan 1998: 42).

The historical context of the period of immigration is also critical as it determines familial assimilation to the dominant white American culture. In the case of immigration several
generations ago, the adherence to Asian culture and lifestyle or assimilation to American culture also influences how the study participants view themselves. It distinguishes biracialism as simply a matter of race, or as one of race, culture, and national identity. This is the first column of the Table. The time of family immigration determines the ‘assimilationist’ perspective. This predicts that as the immigrant parents’ socioeconomic status increases, the nuclear family will be more likely to identify with the majority group (white in this state and at this university) because they will be more fully integrated into mainstream society (Gordon 1964). Integration includes language, food, and cultural normative behaviors.

Although I assumed that ancestry would play a strong role in the shaping of the participants’ identities, especially for those with at least one immigrant parent, this did not lead to as strong of a dual-cultural connection as I had initially thought. For instance, while Tisha Miranda Smith’s mom is Chinese and raised her with strong Asian values and culture, other individuals with immigrant parents were monocultural and monolingual and as such told me they identified “entirely” with white American culture. Elisabeth’s mother immigrated from the Philippines, yet her family placed more significance on raising her with her white father’s culture of Judaism. Instead of having her learn both cultures, her parents chose to emerge her in and assimilate her to the Jewish culture and forgo the Asian side of her heritage. Roger’s father immigrated from Korea but due to his parent’s separation at a young age and his mother’s subsequent second marriage to a white man, he has no connection to Korea excluding his father’s connection and a Korean name (which was legally changed to be his middle name; he now has a European last name). Elisabeth and Roger’s experiences show how having an immigrant parent does not necessarily translate to a more multicultural identity.
Long familial histories in the US also show little connection to incorporating Asian identity. For sisters Andrea and Samantha Evans’, “on one side, it was [my mom’s] grandparents and the other side [my mom’s] great grandparents” who immigrated to the US and then intermarried within the Chinese American community in Detroit. Their mother was the first to marry outside her race when she married a white man. With this long history in the US, Andrea said “I personally feel like I don’t have a whole lot of Chinese culture. . . I personally feel like I’ve been assimilated to the American culture.”

Emily’s great grandparents immigrated from Japan prior to World War II and intentionally distanced themselves from Japanese culture and language during that era of legalized and deeply entrenched institutional discrimination.

My grandparents have always been very hesitant to talk about being Japanese during WWII. . . All I know is that during WWII soldiers came into their house. They left a lot of family in Japan so they’d write letters back and forth. Soldiers came into their house in Idaho and burned everything. And they weren’t allowed to cross the bridge [into a different part of town]. So I think after that they wanted to be as American as they could be. They stopped speaking Japanese too. That’s all [my grandparents] will tell us.

Emily’s grandparents felt that passing on even the smallest bits of Japanese culture through distilled ethnicity was dangerous in a time of racial persecution and therefore assimilated as much as possible to white American culture. Emily’s grandfather even joined the military and was finally honored for his service during the Obama administration. This is a point of pride and tension. After the family lost what it meant to be Japanese, they are finally acknowledged for
their mistreatment and service. As such, Emily only affiliates with the Japanese race, not the culture or language which influences her decision to self-identify as half-Asian half-white.

I found that relationship to the immigrant(s) through ancestral ties was the least influential contributor to Asian-white biracial identity. Some immigrant parents chose not to pass on their Asian culture or language to the study participants, distancing the Asian-white biracial participants from feeling connected to Asian culture and instead assimilating to the white American normative culture. Some first-generation participants such as Wyatt feel relatively the same amount of connection to their Asian side as do participants several generations removed. As such, families immersing their children in white American culture creates individuals who identify with such.

B. Phenotypic Identity

Racial categories have long been defined by phenotypic markers including skin color, hair texture, and eye shape. People often think they can identify the race of someone else based solely on these types of physical characteristics. In turn, these external identifications can have a strong influence on how one self-identifies.

In the interviews I conducted, the Asian-white biracial individuals thought others classified them based on their physical characteristics shaped their phenotypic identity. The external force of society labeling an Asian-white biracial individuals’ physical appearance as non-white or white heavily influenced their feelings of belonging and otherness in both white and Asian spaces. Being viewed and then treated as non-white can lead to the internalization of a minority identity as whites are the gatekeepers to this identity. Alternatively, when white-Asian biracial individuals “pass” as white, they may find themselves accepted into the dominant group and reaping various personal and institutional privileges.
This category, in particular, shows how race for biracial individuals is a juxtaposition between self-perception and societal assignment. However, there were mixed opinions of how participants thought they looked and how others saw them. As such, the self-reflection on how an individual thinks they look to others determines how they chose to label themselves, behave, and present outwardly in a feedback loop.

In Kibria’s (2002) study of second generation Chinese and Korean identities, when talking about Asian-white intermarriage, “others would recognize the ‘white blood’ of the Asian-white child, but they would not see the child as white. Even a mere hint of ‘Asianness’ in his features would be enough to bring his white identity into question. ‘Asian looks’ were then quite powerful in their ability to raise doubts about a child’s identity as white” (177). As stated in Thomas Theorem (Dictionary of Sociology: 2014), when people define their situations as real, those situations are made real.

Roger explained how his racial identity was in some ways like a reflective mirror, “my [blended] family is completely white. People can see that I’m not purely white. People who are fully Asian can really tell. So, I would agree that we’re different.” Roger’s statement implies that Asian people are generally more able to determine his biracial Asian-white status over white populations who attribute his features to a ‘not completely white’ or ‘non-white other’. This statement contradicts some of his other responses. Roger had previously identified the university as “mostly white” and that he “fits in” with that group. I attribute this to culture instead of racial ambiguity; that he thinks he looks ambiguously ‘white enough’ to pass as white and act culturally white American which in turn allows that population to accept him into their community.
Phenotypic identity is subjective, and while white Americans may be able to choose which of their European-origin groups they may want to highlight (Waters 1993), biracial individuals may be assigned or self-assigned to one group or another. As discussed in the literature review, Hall (1980) claimed there was no correlation between phenotypic expression and identity formation. My research found otherwise. As Noah Jin-Soon Kim describes, “I think the Asian side really gets pulled out more because everyone in the US is white”. As Noah’s quote illustrates, race is not an imaginary concept but is seen and influences the individual in everyday circumstances (Omi and Winant 1988).

Of those whom I interviewed, as shown in Table 4, two out of the sixteen participants said they thought that other students at the university perceive them to be Hispanic. For Emma it was due to her curly hair. Andrea thinks that because LatinX populations are the majority minority group in this state and at this university, when faced with racial ambiguity, or how “people can’t really tell what I am”, the ambiguous person is socially assigned as LatinX. Perceived phenotypic expression is not the sole indicator in self-identity as neither Emma nor Andrea would consider putting Hispanic/LatinX on a demographic form even if they think their appearance aligns with those categories.

Five out of sixteen participants told me during the interview that they think they look white, and that others often perceive them that way. For Roger, Jonas, and Neal, they all think they look white, and this leads them to fill out ‘white’ on single selection demographic forms, and self-identify as white. These three illustrate how in some cases, physical appearance can indeed have consequences for how one chooses to self-identity (this is obviously contrary to how Emma and Andrea responded, as they were perceived as entirely different ethnic categories that were incongruent with all their other identities). In cases like those for Roger, Jonas, and Neal,
though, I argue phenotypic identity works as a snowball effect to compound self-identity. In the case of whiteness, these three men Roger, Jonas and Neal said that their perceived whiteness prevents them from participating in Asian spaces, contributing to diversity, or identifying as Asian. Because they feel unable to express both identities, it forces them to choose only one race.

Arjun who described himself as “brown” due to his Indian heritage. I attribute this to the social connotations of darker tones of being mixed race in which in the US, there is a strong dividing color line (Omi and Winant 1988). Because of his phenotypic expression, society does not allow him to fall into the model minority of ‘yellow’ toned Asian but into a more ‘troublesome’ brown. American society unfairly prosecutes and targets darker skinned individuals, regardless of if they are actually half-white (Stockstill 2018). As Arjun is treated as a person of color, his whiteness is hidden, and he does not identify with it. He similarly has a compounding snowball effect in which he sees himself as brown, he perceives society to treat him as a person of color, and he identifies as being a minority. These compounding cyclical effects are to the distinct ‘sides’ of the racial line; Asian only or white only; minority person of color only or white only.

The social difference between yellow and brown create different social hierarchy and treatment. The model minority allows social acceptance for Asian people, but there is no comparable status for ‘brown’ individuals. Arjun may be more aware of his Asian traits because they are not East-Asian. “Racially ambiguous people may have the agency to influence how others categorize them but may be less able to affect the way others treat them,” (Stockstill 2018). As with the black community, even within the Asian community there is a phenotypic divide in skin color that has become apparent in how biracial people see themselves.
Of the remaining participants, four of sixteen were not sure how they looked or how others saw them or had not thought deeply about their appearance. “It's a very confusing thing because of, like, I just don’t know what I look like either though. Like, I look in the mirror and I'm like, I don’t like look one or the other to myself, I’m just me,” says Tisha. Elizabeth’s father is Jewish so she proudly referenced her “Jew fro” making her not look any part of what society perceives Asian. Her mother is Filipina and so Elizabeth is also darker skinned than East Asian-white biracial individuals. The combination of non-stereotypical traits associated with both her white and Asian sides leaves her uncertain on how others perceive her. Four out of sixteen said they looked mixed. Those who identify as phenotypically mixed and those who are unsure and therefore receive uncertain social responses perceived more flexibility in terms of how they can identify, and hence did not feel forced into the compounding cycle.

Phenotypic identity is a response to public uncertainty and questions like “what are you?”. I ask study participants the question “have you ever been asked “what are you” or any variation of it?”. Fourteen of sixteen participants responded yes. This question also assumes that the white questioners assume Asian-white individuals physical appearance leads them to be un-American or non-human. This question leads to a variety of emotional and verbal responses in a broad spectrum. Roger calls it his “party trick” while Jack playfully asks the third-party questioner to guess ‘what he is’. Arjun admitted he has gotten upset at the questioner and responded with a hostile response such as “I’m human.”

Asian-white biracial individuals in the United States are regularly subjected to such microaggressions due to their racially ambiguous status. Microaggressions are small, everyday forms of racism that can appear as subtle or unintentional remarks and actions that are other the recipient due to their non-dominant status; in this case race. “The persistence in treating Asian
Americans as outsiders in their own county has resulted in everyday racial slights as well as targeted violence, murder, and hate crimes” (Lee 2015: 9). Microaggressions are important to study because if a participant has been the receiver of a microaggression, it shows their outsider status from the cultural norm. As Erika Lee (2015:9) states,

on a more daily basis, Asian Americans continue to be seen as outsiders in the Unites States despite the fact that many are U.S. citizens and are from families that have been in the country for generations . . . They are asked, ‘No, where are you really from?’ The underlying assumption behind these questions is that Asians cannot possibly be real Americans and do not belong in the United States. Instead, they are perpetual foreigners at worst, or probationary Americans at best.

This is one form of microaggression; assuming nationality based upon physical appearance. Asking a bi-racial person, “what are you?” assumes that the white questioners thinks Asian-white individuals physical appearance leads them to be un-American or non-human.

Although almost all the participants in this study had experiences some form of microaggressions. Wyatt said “I don't feel offended. So, I just tell them [what race I am].” In contrast, Tisha emphasized how racialized this university community is “I think if you were to say that to somebody who wasn't bi racial, that they'd find it kind of offensive like, ‘What are you?’ You know, I'm a human being, obviously first and foremost, but like, I know that they're asking about my race, so it's kind of become more of just like one of those irritating questions that you get asked like you're used to.” Both Tisha and Arjun emphasize that being biracial opens them up to an unintentional public response of them not being human. In this university community, white is human.
C. Demographic Identity

For the purpose of this thesis, I defined demographic identity as an external, institutionally defined identity category or set of categories. In turn, people are forced to select an identity category (or multiple, when allowed) to identify themselves according to prescribed categories created by an organization or the state. I learned that this category can and does fluctuate depending on the structure and options in the form, the perceived intent of the form, the number of choices the individual is allowed to select, the potential benefits of intentional monoracial or biracial selection, and the strength of phenotypic, self, and ancestral identities.

This institution that created the demographic form categories defines the racial constraints. This is never a problem for whites, but a negotiation for Asian-white biracial people. Similar to Mary Waters argument that white Americans have ethnic options, “[t]his population can increasingly choose how much and which parts of their ethnicity to make a part of their lives” (Waters 1990: 16). I also found biracial Asian-white individuals use this method of choice most commonly for applications to universities, scholarships, internships, and jobs. One way the fluctuation of identity in demographic forms is seen is through the ‘fluid strategy’. It can also be referred to as symbolic ethnicity, which is “a voluntary type of ethnic attachment that is centered on ethnic symbols, is highly subjective and intermittent in character, and entails few if any sustained commitments” (Gans: 1979. Kibria 2002: 69).

There was a split among participants in this study regarding whether selecting one race helped or hindered acceptance into the program or school. Emily “think[s] specifically, just in the application process, being a minority sometimes helps.” This was entirely based upon individual interpretation on what society deems valuable or harmful for applications; in this case she argues that her minority status will lead to affirmative action and therefore increase her
chances of acceptance. Drawing from the contemporary Harvard Lawsuits (NBC News 2019),
the way certain activities, hobbies, involvement, and class schedules are distributed most
commonly with some races over others, such as chess or spelling bees, can be seen as a form of
discrimination. Depending on the university’s application process, affirmative action may seek
out those application qualifications or neglect them in favor of other measurements of university
applicational desires. Emily intentionally selects Asian, even when provided the opportunity to
select as many races as she would like; proving her demographic identity to be separate and
distinct from her self-described identity.

Samantha won a minority scholarship for the engineering school. As part of the
conditions, she had to join a student group or organization for minorities in engineering but
chose Women in Engineering over Asians in Engineering because she felt more closely affiliated
with the minority status of being a woman over being an ethnic minority. This was a fluid,
strategic choice and contributes to her white-American cultural identity; shying away from non-
white racial affiliations. Though her family celebrates Chinese New Year, she has been distant
from race since a young age. “We learned about Chinese New Year in my Kindergarten class. I
came home and asked my mom ‘Do you know anyone who’s Chinese?’ And she was like ‘You
are.’” This shows how her family may celebrate something in a minimal way that does not
outwardly attribute it to race or culture. Though this was from the innocence of a child, however
Samantha’s mom did not identify herself as Chinese but assigned that to Samantha who is only
half. Suddenly, Samantha had to self-determine what it meant to be Chinese, but in her life, it
meant being culturally American and only checking off an “Asian box” on a form on occasion or
strategically.
ii. Demographic identity with only one option available

When demographic questionnaires force individuals to select only one category or option, biracial or multi-raced people must decide which racial category they most strongly identify with or believe will be beneficial to them for that specific questionnaire. This can be based entirely on phenotypic identity, cultural identity, or manipulated in the ‘fluid strategy’ to select what seems most appropriate or beneficial given the context. I found that when they are only able to select one option, five participants select other, five select Asian, five select white, and one changes between white and Asian regularly (but never ‘other’).

Roger has an agreement with his siblings; that “if we can’t fill out both Asian and white, we don’t fill out that form at all”. Tisha, Emily, Jace, and Arjun feel obligated to select “Asian only” when presented with one option because they say they contribute to the minority population and think the general population assume they are entirely Asian. This social pressure is through experiences and micro-aggressions that ostracize them from a white status. In Arjun’s case, he not only feels like he contributes to the minority but is treated as a minority on a day-to-day basis and cannot put anything other than Asian only on one option forms. Upon President Trump’s 2016 election, his mother called him and warned him not to respond to any type of targeting he might face as a person of color. Her need to discuss this with him shows how the strength of one racial identity can overpower the other.

Roger, and Jonas select “white only” when presented with only one option on forms because they identify as nationally and culturally white American due to their white, suburban, middle class upbringings.

Though on forms Tisha selects Asian and she previously discussed her internal conflict in that selecting process, “if I’m with my white friends I’m Asian but if I’m with my Asian friend
I’m white” says Tisha. For her, being biracial seems to be very polarized with always one dominant race. Tisha also says “I always check Asian just because that's what I identify more with because my mother raised me. So, I just feel like I can relate less to white people that I can to Asian people.” This fluidity and internal conflict are determined by social settings and external forces independent of the individual.

When only able to select one option, five participants select other, five select Asian, five select white, and one changes between white and Asian regularly (but never other). Only Neal makes the same selection of white only even when able to select more than one demographic category. The even split is reactionary to social pressure to identify a certain way, as well as a strategic selection for perceived self-benefit.

iii. Demographic identity with 2 or more options available

Having multiple choices in demographic forms allows for potentially more accurate or more fulsome self-expression. The presence of choice can also reduce some social pressures to identify a certain way while still providing the opportunity to be strategic if so desired.

When presented the ability to select two or more options on a demographic form, 14 study participants select Asian and white (and their ancestral Asian country if possible). Only Neal selects white only and Wyatt usually selects both Asian and white but occasionally white only.

The biracial individuals in my study felt most accurately represented when presented with options on demographic forms. In those cases, they reported they don’t feel torn between selecting only one race or the dehumanizing option of “other.” Whites have long benefitted from the ability to select between “ethnic options” because “the degree of intermarriage and geographic and social mobility among whites of European extraction in the United States means that they enjoy a great deal of choice and numerous options when it comes to ethnic
identification,” (Waters 1990: 16). White Americans have the social option to select a general white or delve further into as many European ancestral cultures if they choose to as their cultural or ancestral origins are almost always represented on demographic forms. Asian-white biracial persons are socially labeled ‘non-white’ yet often cannot describe their background on demographic forms. In the current university demographic form, for instance, only some Asian countries are identified and then general regions like South East Asian are lumped together. Even if an Asian-white biracial individual can select both Asian and white, the pan-ethnic Asian identity is implied in the form construction. Individuals such as myself still have to settle for vague South East Asian-white yet others are able to select Korean-white. Though I acknowledge histories of immigration and immigrant community population sizes, allowing some groups to identify thoroughly while lumping others into homogenous groups still is erasing the lived experiences, cultural differences, and desired self-identification.

Although the university does allow students to select more than one race, the university does not report what biracial people fill out on the annual diversity reports, a common statistical practice when there are low response rates. Nonetheless, it does further erase diversity even once it has been selected. When asked if they thought these small statistics would ever be displayed, the data analysis employee said, “most people wouldn’t be interested, and it would be really hard to do a good visual of it.” I interpreted this as dismissive since he sent me two tables with the data immediately after the interview. The university has the information but does not deem it important enough to publish anywhere. Instead, in these reports, when “more than one race” is selected, all those responses are lumped together into a “more than one race category.” Arjun finds this condescending. “What’s the point of asking us and giving the options if they [the university] doesn’t care or represent us like we want it anyway?” Jack is distrustful of big
government and “doesn’t take [demographic forms] seriously”. As such, his responses change depending on who requests his information and what he thinks they will do with it.

D. Self-Identity

Self-identity is how individuals chose to present and represent themselves. This identity category is heavily influenced by the other categories of ancestry, physical appearance, cultural identity, and the ways they are institutionally categorized via demographic forms. With that said, however, I did find that others’ perceptions of their phenotypic race have a strong influence on self-identity.

In general, as they basically identified with the ethnic American model, they expected to have ethnic options; that is, they expected that the dominant society would not impose an ethnic identity on them. The dashing of this expectation produced an ethnic bind—a powerful if ambivalent and at times uncertain sense that ethnic identity was for them not a voluntary matter, at least not in the same way that it was for such European-origin groups as Italian Americans and Irish Americans (Kibria 2002: 68).

I found that eleven of the sixteen respondents self-identified as half-Asian half-white, three into white/Caucasian, one as Asian American, and one as mixed race. Mixed race is a separate category from half-Asian half-white as it is described as an independent status of not belonging to one group versus affiliation with two specific groups.

Self-identity and demographic identity with two or more options showed a good deal of overlap for the participants. Both identity categories allow the flexibility for more than one expression; weather phenotypic or cultural. Both allow the individual to consider what is the most important influence upon their identity. The participants that did not have the same answers
in self-identity and demographic identity with 2+ options were Roger, Jonas, and Neal; the same three participants who repeatedly identify as white except in the demographic identity in 2+ options category in which they acknowledge their white lineage. They have all independently but similarly decided that culture has attributed more to how they identify than phenotypic identity.

A common method respondents used to describe their self-identity to me was through foods. Delmer Davis suggests in *Food as Literary Theme* (1997), that “[t]he centrality of food to human experience and to personal and cultural identity is mirrored in the food preoccupations of literature.” Comparing oneself to food is a socially normal method as food is a universal love and international cultural link. It is also familiar; something anyone can relate to in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way. “My mom is coffee, my dad is milk, and I’m hot chocolate,” said Arjun, consistent with his emphasis on South Asians being phenotypically darker skinned than other races. His hot chocolate metaphor is intended to convey phenotypic identity. Noah is a “banana…yellow on the outside, white on the inside.” Noah is referring to both phenotypic and cultural self-identity. Society assigns him the phenotypic designation of looking Asian but he self-identifies as culturally white hence the “white on the inside”. “I’m all mixed up together like an ice cream swirl” describes Tisha. She is referring to her self-identity; mixed up but still visibly both races and cultures.

The choice of food as metaphors for race assumes that everyone knows what hot chocolate, bananas, and ice cream swirls are. When choosing how to describe themselves with these foods, the choice reflects what’s more important to them: external phenotypic traits or internalized culture. These comparisons imply a juxtaposition of colors, however, differ in referring to which identity is most significant to the individual. These examples also show how phenotypic identity and cultural identity are intrinsically intertwined. Bananas grow with their
peel as part of the unit. The mix race experience is different between individuals, seen in which food they use to describe their identities.

Food was not the only methods for metaphorical self-description and to assert one’s self-identity. Noah describes himself as “Light yellow; white and yellow.” Similar to Tisha, this self-imposed description can be for both culture and phenotypic expression. Jack diverges into a non-living, uncolored metaphor and is a “bridge,” symbolizing how he connects the two different ethnicities and cultures. Again, bridges are consistent with the non-threatening, non-confrontational metaphor. Nobody self-identified as a dragon, ninja, or ‘dangerous’ figure. This could be attributed to the assimilationist perspective; the desire to fit causes study participants to unconsciously chose socially acceptable, familiar, light-hearted representatives.

One of the most significant contributors to Tina’s identity is her Japanese and American dual citizenship. Japan forces dual-citizens to forfeit one citizenship at the age of 23. “I hate it. Why can’t I just be both? Because I am both. I’m half Japanese, half white.” This was an emotionally difficult problem for Tina. “I’ll probably give up Japanese since I was born here and raised here in the US. But my parents are here. But I’ve had both and am both and should be able to keep both. I hate that they make me choose.” Tina emphasized how strongly she identifies as half Japanese, half white and governmental politics such as the burden of knowing she would have to forfeit a citizenship soon was taking a toll on her.

E. Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is the final category show in in Table 4. This was the one category that was assigned by me, after listening to the respondents tell their stories of identity. Cultural identity, as defined here, is dependent upon the national identity, family adherence to culture, and surrounding culture in the area the individual grew up. As culture involves food, language,
social normative behaviors, religion, and national identity, the way the participants talked about their interests and home life all provided clues to their cultural identity. As all study participants were born in the United States, they already have American citizenship like the majority of the people they are surrounded by in the suburbs and state. Participants fell into three categories I outline; culturally white American, culturally mixed equal, and culturally Asian American.

Distilled ethnicity contributes to how influential Asian culture was upon the individual. “[D]istilled ethnicity meshed easily with the idea of giving children cultural choices, of not forcing them to learn or proactive [Asian cultural] customs,” (Kibria 2002: 161). This family choice on which cultural customs to emphasize and pass on is seen by how individuals talked about their Asian side; focusing on codes about food, culture, language, and religion. Asian food was talked about most frequently among the participants, although the other aspects of culture also emerged.

i. **Culturally white American**

Culturally white American is the label I assign to the people who identify most with American white hegemonic cultural values, food, and lifestyle. Regardless of their ancestral immigrant or phenotypic identity, belonging to this category is determined by their social comfort in white dominant spaces. As discussed in the Ancestral Immigration section, “[d]istilled ethnicity, then, suggests a passed-down ethnicity that meshes easily with established notions of a mainstream middle-class American lifestyle and sensibility,” (Kibria 2002: 162). In the case of cultural identity, the suburban lifestyle and upbringing in America has overshadowed the majority of distilled ethnicity, distancing biracial people from non-white cultures.

Colorado, the state in which this university and study are situated is 87.3% white (U.S. Census Bureau 2018). Everyone except Noah, Wyatt, and Jace are from this state and were
immersed in this white dominant state’s demographics. Jonas, for example, said, “I don’t think about race and think about identifying with the ‘normal’ which is white”. When surrounded by white people and white culture, Jonas ultimately will identity with being white.

For Jack, his white side’s distilled ethnicity has proven to be more influential. His grandmother on his white father’s side is Jewish so he went on a Birthright trip- a free trip for Jewish people to Israel. That has been more impactful on his view of ethnicity and culture than his mother’s immigration status. His mother was only six when she immigrated to the US so she too adapted to American culture.

I classified twelve of sixteen participants in this study as identified with white American culture. All of these participants were born in the US and were raised in suburban neighborhoods. This culminates in a preference to engage in American culture with a higher comfort level than engagement in an Asian culture. This comfort is seen in the normalization of behaviors that reside within the cultural sphere as how “I even do that white boy fist bump when I dance,” Noah Jin-Soon Kim noted. He attributes the action to white culture and knowingly and willingly participates.

Fifteen of the sixteen study participants are not involved in any racial or cultural student groups on campus. They said they did not feel “Asian enough”, that they “didn’t really fit”, or that they had to prove that they are Asian too. Language also shaped cultural identity. The lack of ability to speak an Asian language causes feelings of being less able to connect to Asian cultures or nations. “Multiracial individuals are expected to prove their alliances and feelings of connection to the ethnic community in order to be accepted as “real” Asians (Ropp 1997: 6). One rational for not fitting in was lack of language skills. Jace took three semesters of college Korean language classes but only because he but still had to fulfil language requirement credits and had
already taken Spanish and Mandarin in high school and “wanted something different.” At the time of the interview, Tina was in the process of completing a Japanese minor and was conflicted with the language placement courses since she could speak conversationally but did not have any reading or writing skills. Tina was conflicted about her language skills because “my family is from Osaka and they speak like a dialect of Japanese. I didn’t realize there was another type until I came here.” Now, Tina is very self-conscious about her lack of ‘formal’ Japanese and has scheduling conflicts preventing her from participating in the Japanese student association.

Some participants like Emma put a big emphasis on what it means to be half Asian and half white. “It’s kinda hard to fit into one group, I guess. Like ever since I’ve grown up, I don’t really fit into like, playing with the Asian group or white group. So, like I’ve always been suspended between one or the other, but not quite fitting in just because I had different cultural aspects of my life… it’s kind of like jumping all over the place.” Emma is hyper aware of phenotypic identity which overwhelms her perception on ‘fitting in’. “[I] kinda get looks like ‘why are you here’”. However, when it comes to language “I’m very beginner. . . Like a few random words here and there.” Because she has little connection to Chinese language, culture, and practices, I put her in culturally white American, while she does not feel like the university has spaces for mixed race people, she would be extremely uncomfortable if immersed in China or entirely Chinese culture. At one point in the interview, she even outright says “I’m more culturally white”. While listening to her internal debates on being torn between two races, I believe her struggle is on race, not culture.

**ii. Culturally mixed equal**

Culturally mixed equal describes three study participants who actively engage in both American and Asian cultural elements including but not limited to language, religious holidays
and engagement, and popular culture. Though white culture is a hegemonic power, they are able to construct their own meanings of race by bringing together both of their halves.

Tina, Tisha, and Neal have been placed into this category as they all actively engage in their Asian side. Neal is the vice president of the Japanese student organization and works at a sushi restaurant. He describes his friends as people who are interested in Japan and Japanese culture. Tina is also half-Japanese but practices both cultures situationally. She visits Japan biannually to visit family and feels comfortable immersing herself in Japanese life. Tisha’s mom raised her with Chinese cultural values and engagement, such as how she celebrates Chinese holidays such as Chinese New Year, has a colloquial Chinese name her grandmother gave her, and speaks Mandarin with enough proficiency to teach Emma some.

Tina, Tisha, and Neal are also very involved in white American culture. Tina is on the figure skating team. Tisha is involved in a volunteer service student group. Neal heavily emphasized his whiteness.

The most significant connection between these three people was language. Of the 16 study participants, only participants Tina, Tisha, and Neal speak their parent’s language with enough confidence to put the speaking proficiency on a resume with only Neal being able to read and write Japanese with confidence. Knowledge of an Asian language allows all three of these people to be truly immersed and comfortable in both cultures.

iii. Culturally Asian dominant

Culturally Asian dominant describes the participants most comfortable engaging with Asian culture, religion, food, and social activities. Though none of the study participants were born abroad and only Neal has lived abroad, Arjun is the only participant I have deemed culturally Asian dominant. Arjun’s white father converted to Hinduism in order to marry his
mother and their family has cut any religious ties from his father’s side. Their family actively celebrates and follows Hindu holidays and observations such as restraining from eating beef and abstaining from western holidays like Christmas or Easter. “Sometimes it’s hard because my friends will want to go out and get burgers or something and I can’t join,” Arjun noted about the social repercussions of some of his cultural and religious practices. He “knows more about cricket than the average American.”

In uniformity with his phenotypic identity of “brown”, Arjun acts and identifies as a person of color. “From a white person’s perspective, they don’t lump Indians in with Asians.” I cannot say if being South Asian contributed to this Asian dominant identity, but his phenotypic identity and family’s religious traditions were the most significant contributors to his self-descriptions and self-identity. Though Arjun is culturally Asian, he is does not feel comfortable going to the Indian student group on campus. “They [referring to the South Asian student association] are all immigrants or first generation and speak Indian languages. No Indian people are second generation like me. It’s not the South Asian American Student Association and I’m not an immigrant. I can’t connect to them at all,” explains Arjun. This shows the flexibility of identity. Though Arjun does not feel connected to newly immigrated Indians, he still identifies with India. I argue his ethnicity has not truly been ‘distilled’ but remained intact and evolved into a way to incorporate it more easily into the American lifestyle he lives.

A future study could study identity formation between South Asian-white biracial individuals and East-Asian biracial people to determine if the phenotypic and religious identity were held more strongly across racial mixing than other groups. Though born and raised in the US with immigrant grandparents on his mother’s side, Arjun is the only culturally Asian dominant individual in my study.
V. CONCLUSION

This thesis was designed to explore how Asian-white biracial university age students identify in different institutional and social contexts. I wanted to know if students felt accurately represented by the university in the annual diversity reports.

In order to conduct this thesis, I interviewed 16 students and one university employee in qualitative, semi-structured interviews. I also analyzed secondary data such as the US Census and university annual diversity reports.

After analyzing the data, I discovered that five different categories influenced the various ways that participants identified. Those categories were: ancestral immigrant, phenotypic identity, demographic identity (when presented with only one selection option or with two or more selection options), self-identity, and cultural identity.

Ancestral immigrant refers to the participants’ Asian family member(s) that came to the US and how many generations ago that occurred. Phenotypic identity is physical indicators of traditional racial categories such as skin color, hair texture and color, and eye shape and color. Demographic identity is defined as the external institutionally set categories that individuals are forced to identify with and place themselves into. This can be with one option; where Asian-white biracial individuals have to make a choice between ‘Asian,’ ‘white,’ or ‘other,’ or two options which allows the possibility for more descriptive and accurate representation. Self-identity is the way individuals chose to both present and represent themselves. Finally, cultural identity is the category I ascribed to participants based upon respondents’ self-identity, religion, food, familial cultural, and social environment growing up.
I found that phenotypic identity influenced how Asian-white biracial peoples identified on demographic forms, yet their cultural identities were independent of phenotype and created mostly from cultural and social upbringing, as well as family adherence to language, culture, and religion. Some individuals felt there were no internal conflicts with being two races while others were focused on their internal debate. This is seen in the way the university represents Asian-white biracial students. Some are unbothered or supportive of being lumped into the “more than one race” category while others are opposed and feel unsupported by the university. This shows the complexity of representing identity; it is not a problem localized solely to the university of study.

My data argues that Khanna’s 2008 study categorizes people into groups they may not identify with and that Khanna becomes the new demographic form; limiting participant stories for the purpose of her research and data presentation. I originally intended to organize participants into the same categories of white-dominant or Asian-dominant, but realized this system was contradictory to the purpose of my study. Khanna’s categories became subcategories in Cultural Identity but were too broad to sort through the multitude of influences that determine identity. I do not think identity can ignore the subtleties of upbringing, surrounding culture, familial immigration timelines, or language and citizenship to which I think Khanna minimizes.

My data contributes to Kibria’s 2002 ideas of distilled ethnicity as the participants that have a culturally white identity may only hold onto very broad or vague distilled ethnicity traditions such as Chinese New Year or cultural foods. I argue that my participants hold less distilled ethnicity due to both being biracially half-white as compared to Kibria’s Asian population, but also in the context of being raised in white suburban neighborhoods that made
passing down ethnicity more difficult. The racial mixture in a white dominant society erases culture.

This thesis is important because it reveals the complexity of multiracial identities and representing them as such. Through the multitude of influences and different ways to look at identity, which I find to be able to be condensed into five categories, which for obvious reasons cannot be on the annual diversity reports.

As with any work, there are limitations. My sample size was relatively small and non-representative of all Asian-white biracial individuals who make up 2.7% of this campus. I was unable to interview anyone of ASEAN descent. I also was not able to interview University admissions employees as I had hoped.

Even with those limitations in mind, this work still shed light on many important identity dynamics. Future work should explore more demographically representative studies and a broader range of Asian ethnic and national backgrounds. This study did not meet any individuals who had lived in their Asian parent’s country. Existing literature claims those who had lived in Asia are less likely to identify with that parent’s race (Khanna 2004: 127), however my research was unable to contribute to that research. My study participants were racially half Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, Taiwanese, Indian, and Filipino/a. A more expansive population including ASEAN nations exclusively of Vietnamese, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma has not been studied and could lend a different insight into identity formation and representation in the US.

I hope that this thesis and future work will reveal the problems of categorizing people by race in an ever-diversifying nation. I hope it sheds a light on how some categories such as ‘other’ can be interpreted as dehumanizing to some. The identities of biracial Asian-white people can be
extremely broad, and even with the commonality of biracialism, the lived experiences of these people are as diverse as their family histories and ancestral immigrants.
VI. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Project Timeline

Timeline

September:
- Complete and submit IRB
  - IRB approved 9/25/18
- 9/25/18 Submit College of Arts and Science Honors Program Application
- 9/25/18 Begin recruiting study participants
- 9/25/18 Begin scheduling interviews

October:
- 10/02/18 Apply to Pacific Sociological Association (PSA) conference
- Week of 10/01/18 Begin interviewing
- Transcribe interviews (in progress...)
  - Begin coding interview themes
- 10/10/18 Write methods section
- 10/22/18 IRB amendment I approved (recruitment materials)

November:
- 11/07/18 IRB amendment II approved (employee participants/related forms)
- Continue interviewing
- 11/14/18 Write intro
- 11/14/18 Write literature review
- Transcribe interviews
  - Begin coding interview themes
  - Thanksgiving Break: have completed 12 student interviews, 1 staff interview

December:
- Continue interviewing, transcribing, coding
- 12/03/18 Write analysis draft
- 12/13/18 Write conclusion
- Set Defense Date with entire committee: March 22nd noon

January:
- Stop interviewing
- Finish coding
- Analyze data
- 1/15/19 compile all chapters and sections together
- 1/22/19 revise methods chapter
- 1/25/19 self-set timeline to academic advisor
- 1/27/19 make methods chapter data tables
- 1/30/19 completed methods chapter to academic advisor
- 1/31/19 write abstract

February:
- 2/4/19 Data Analysis chapter 1 to academic advisor
- 2/6/19 Data Analysis chapter 2 to academic advisor
- 2/8/19 Data Analysis chapter 3 to academic advisor
- 2/11/19 Conclusion to academic advisor
- 2/13/19 Lit Review to academic advisor
- 2/20/19 Abstract to academic advisor
- 2/25/19 Complete Paper including Appendixes/tables to academic advisor

March:
- March 11, 2019 Full paper to committee
- Friday, March 22nd noon defense!
- Spring Break (March 25-29) make any final changes if acceptable to committee
- 3/28-3/31 presenting at the Pacific Sociological Association Conference in Oakland, CA

April:
- 4/9/19 Final Copy due to Honors Program by 3pm
- 4/12/19 Final Copy due to CU Repository by midnight
- 4/19/19 Final honors designations emailed out
Appendix 2: Student Consent Form

Title of research study: Asian-White Biracial Identity Through Demographic Categorization and Self Identification of University Aged Students

IRB Protocol Number: 18-0376

Investigator: Hannah Hallenbeck
Advisor: Dr. Lori Peek

Purpose of the Study:

You are being invited to participate in this study because you identify with Asian-white biracialism and are 18 years of age or above. The purpose of the study is to understand the identity formation process for Asian-white biracial university aged students and also about how the University collects and shares information on biracial students.

We expect that you will be in this research study for 1 hour.

We expect about 20 people will be in this research study; approximately 5 University employees and approximately 15 Asian-white biracial university students.

Explanation of Procedures

You will participate in one, 1-hour interview session. During this session, you will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire. The research will be done at the location of your choosing, based upon your availability. You will only interact with the interviewer conducting the study, Hannah Hallenbeck. There will be an audio recorder, which will also get verbal consent on the audio recording. The completed research will be sent to you upon request.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. Any existing data and completed demographic questionnaires will be deleted upon request and not used in the study.

If you are a CU Boulder student or employee, taking part in this research is not part of your class work or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring
compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out. Audio recordings will be kept on a password protected cellular or laptop device. Transcriptions of the audio and any paper information and notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Upon the completion of the study, all recordings will be deleted.

There are some things that you might tell Hannah Hallenbeck that she CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:

- Child abuse or neglect
- A crime you or others plan to commit
- Harm that may come to you or others

**Payment for Participation**

You will not be paid to be in this study.

**Questions**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to investigator Hannah Hallenbeck at (719)484-9706 or by email: Hannah.hallenbeck@colorado.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB. You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Signatures**

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of subject: ____________________________ Date: ____________

Printed name of subject: ____________________________

Signature of person obtaining consent: ________________ Date: ____________

Printed name of person obtaining consent: ____________________________
Interview Guide for Asian-White Biracial University Student Participants 18+ Years Old

Researcher: Hannah Hallenbeck

Protocol Number: 18-0376

Interview introduction: Thank you so much for agreeing to allow me to interview you. As I mentioned on [the phone, via email] my name is Hannah Hallenbeck and I am completing a sociology undergraduate honors thesis on Asian-white biracial identification. As part of that thesis, I am interviewing students to learn more about how they decide to self-identify when it comes to race.

Before we proceed, however, I have a consent form from the University IRB that I would like to review with you. [Review consent form, collect necessary signatures, leave copy of form with interviewee.]

Questions:

To begin, and as you know, I asked you to be in this study because you are of Asian and white racial background. Thus, to begin, will you please tell me more about your family background? How do you racially identify now?

Has the way that you have racially identified changed over time?

Does your racial identification change across contexts (e.g., if you are filling out a form, versus in a classroom, versus with family or friends)?

Will you share with me your earliest memory of race? Or when you first thought about race?

When did you first recognize that you were both white and Asian?

Do you remember the first time you had to fill out a demographic questionnaire about race?

Tell me more about that experience.

For your university admissions demographics section, do you remember how you filled out the race question?
How did that selection influence your identity coming into university?

Was race a consideration when applying to this university?

If you could tell the campus administrators who create the demographic questions something, what would you tell them?

How would you describe the racial demographics of this university?

How do you see yourself within that description?

How do you think other people on this campus perceive you?

How would you describe your friend group?

Does your race influence who you hang out with?

Are you a part of any national/racial/cultural student organization?

If so, what was most influential of the organization for you to join?

Why did you choose this one over other national/ethnic/cultural organization?

Can you tell me about the food you eat at home?

How important is language to you?

Do you celebrate any religious or cultural practices?

Have you traveled to the country your parent originates from? What was that experience like?

Is there anything else you want to add or share?

Thank you so much for your time. If you think you know anyone who fits the study criteria and would be interested in participating in my study, please let me know. Now that we have completed the interview, will you please take just another few moments to complete this demographic questionnaire?
Appendix 4: Demographic Form

Demographic Questions for an Undergraduate Honors Thesis Study of Asian-White Biracial Identity Through Admission Demographic Categorization and Self Identification of University Students

Protocol Number: 18-0376

*Questions based directly off the wording and options from the 2018 “The Common Application” demographic form*

Age:

Sex:

☐ Male
☐ Female

If you would like the opportunity, we invite you to share more about your gender identity below:

Country of birth:

City and state of birth:

Number of years you have lived in the United States:

Number of years you have lived outside the United States:

Number of languages you are proficient in:

Select your citizen status:

☐ US citizen or US national
☐ US dual citizen
☐ US permanent resident
☐ US refugee or US asylee
☐ Other (non US)

Please indicate how you identify yourself:

☐ American Indian on Alaskan Native
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
☐ White

Which best describes your Asian background?

☐ China
☐ India
☐ Japan
☐ Korea
☐ Pakistan
☐ Philippines
☐ Vietnam
☐ Other East Asia
☐ Other South Asia
☐ Other Southeast Asia

Which best describes your White background?
☐ Europe
☐ Middle East
☐ Other
Appendix 5: Recruitment Flyer

If you:

1. Are 18+
2. Are a CU Boulder student
3. Identify as Asian-White Biracial

Please consider taking part in an undergraduate Sociology honors thesis research project including a 45-60 minutes interview, completing a consent form and demographic questionnaire. No compensation. Confidential.

Please contact:
Hannah.Hallenbeck@Colorado.edu
or
(719)484-9706
Appendix 6: Employee Interview Guide

Interview Guide for 18+ Year-Old Admissions Office and Office of Data Analytics Employees Involved in Racial Demographic Data Collection or Analyses

Researcher: Hannah Hallenbeck
Protocol Number: 18-0376

Interview introduction: Thank you so much for agreeing to allow me to interview you. As I mentioned on [the phone, via email] my name is Hannah Hallenbeck and I am completing a sociology undergraduate honors thesis on Asian-white biracial identification. As part of that thesis, I am interviewing students to learn more about how they decide to self-identify when it comes to race.

For this interview, I am hoping to learn more from you, however, regarding how the University collects racial demographic information, and what they do with that information. Before we proceed, however, I have a consent form from the University IRB that I would like to review with you. [Review consent form, collect necessary signatures, leave copy of form with interviewee.]

Questions:
What is your role within the admissions/Data Analytics department?

Can you tell me more specifically how you collect and analyze racial demographic information?

   How do you present or share those analyses?

My understanding through reviewing past documents and diversity reports from the University, is that CU only began allowing students the option to select for “more than one race” in the 2011-2012 diversity report.

   Can you explain the shift to the “more than one race” option?

How did that shift in data collection effect your analyses and data presentation?

Do you receive comments from prospective or enrolled students regarding the race questions on the form?

My thesis is specifically about Asian-white biracial students.

   Can you tell me if you have specific data or insights on this population group?

Upon my review [show forms: 2010 US census “two race” racial categories and University of Colorado boulder 2011-2012 Diversity Report], the reported still does not allow the selection of what “more than one race” constitutes. For example, the section “more than one race”, does not
allow for “Asian-white” or other variations of more than one race. Do you anticipate it changing in the university’s reports?

Is the admission/Data Analytics department interested in encouraging or promoting diversity? If so, what does this look like?

How long have you worked at the University?

What types of racial demographic changes have you witnessed since you started here?
Where do you see the racial demographic transitions in the next decade?

Is there anything else you want to add or share?

*Thank you for participating in my study. If you know anyone in your department who fits the study criteria and you think would be interested in participating, please let me know.*
Appendix 7: Employee Consent Form

**Title of Research Study:** Asian-White Biracial Identity Through Demographic Categorization and Self Identification of University Aged Students

IRB Protocol Number: 18-0376

**Investigator:** Hannah Hallenbeck  
**Advisor:** Dr. Lori Peek

**Purpose of the Study:**

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are employed by the university’s Admissions Office or Data Analytics Office and are 18 years old or above. The purpose of the study is to understand the identity formation process for Asian-white biracial university aged students and also about how the University collects and shares information on biracial students.

I expect that you will be in this research study for 1 hour.

I expect about 20 people will be in this research study; about 5 University employees and approximately 15 Asian-white biracial university students.

**Explanation of Procedures**

You will participate in one, 1-hour interview session. Before the interview, you are asked to complete this consent form. The research will be done at the location of your choosing and based upon your availability. You will only interact with the interviewer conducting the study, Hannah Hallenbeck. There will be an audio recorder, which will also get verbal consent on the audio recording. Hannah will also be taking notes. The completed research will be sent to the study participant upon request.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. Any existing data and completed demographic questionnaires will be deleted upon request and not used in the study.

If you are a CU Boulder student or employee, taking part in this research is not part of your class work or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

**Confidentiality**
Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for scientific purposes; however, your identity will not be given out.

Audio recordings will be kept on a password protected cellular or laptop device. Transcriptions of the audio and any paper information and notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Upon the completion of the study, all recordings will be deleted.

Hannah Hallenbeck is a mandatory reporter for the university. As such, here are some things that you might tell Hannah Hallenbeck that she CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:

- Child abuse or neglect
- A crime you or others plan to commit
- Harm that may come to you or others

**Payment for Participation**
You will not be paid to be in this study.

**Questions**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to investigator Hannah Hallenbeck at (719) 484-9706 or by email: Hannah.hallenbeck@colorado.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB. You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

**Signatures**
Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of subject___________________________________________ Date: ___________
Printed name of subject__________________________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent____________________________ Date: ___________
Printed name of person obtaining consent__________________________

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