

Composing Practices of Multiracial Emergent Adult College Students: Expressions of
Identity

By

Jenny Lynn McFadden, Master of Arts English

A dissertation submitted to the Department of Doctoral Studies in Literacy

of Salisbury University in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Contemporary Curriculum, Theory, and Instruction: Literacy

April 25, 2018

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Dedication

To Kaliah Rose and Shaylin Meadow. Your smiles light the way to a tomorrow worth
fighting for.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, all praise, honor, and glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom I am nothing, and apart from whom I can accomplish no good thing. I thank you for leading me every step of the way.

To my beloved husband, Rashieme Lamar McFadden: None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for supporting me in all things big and small, for willingly marrying me at the start of this insanity, and for holding everything together at home while I gave so much of my life to this work. You are my favorite beginning and my happily ever after, and you always bring out the best in me. Thank you for being my closest friend, my soulmate, and my forever. I do, I do.

To my cherished daughters, Kaliah Rose McFadden and Shaylin Meadow McFadden, I thank you for being my motivation and inspiration. You are my reasons for striving for excellence in the classroom; I try to be the same kind of teacher I want for you. What's more, this research would never have been conceived if not for my desire to see voices like yours in the literature to which the scholarly community turns for answers.

To my Mom, Carol Meister, thank you for watching the Shaynado for me during all of this. I thank you and Mommom, Margaret Parker, for allowing your house to be subjected to her extreme energies for so many days and nights while I was finishing this work. I thank you both for always supporting my education and believing in me. From an early age, you both taught me a love of reading and learning, and I never would have journeyed this far without you and the values you've taught me.

Judi, thank you for being my chair and for always guiding me every step of the way, from welcoming me to my first tentative days as a graduate assistant to encouraging

my preliminary research design ideas to overseeing all of the exciting and exhausting work that followed. Thank you for advising me through constant emails, texts, and calls, and for prioritizing my work and my needs, as a student and a person. You are my mentor, but you are also my friend. Thank you is not enough.

I am also grateful to my entire committee. Laurie and Erin, your contributions to this project have been invaluable. Laurie, I will always be thankful for the opportunity I received working with you on your research, and I want you to know that London was a once in a lifetime experience for Kaliah and I! I appreciate the kindness and patience you and Jon exercised at dinner in the U.K.—my guess is that few academics speak twelve-year-old girl as well as you both. Erin, I sincerely thank you for encouraging me to do the sort of research I love, and for introducing me to so many beautiful works that inspired me to write the kind of dissertation I wanted to write.

To Cohort One: We made it! Christine and Gray, thank you for praying for me. Courtney, thank you for your huge assistance with my recruitment efforts for this study, and for being an amazing friend. Heather, thank you for always thinking to ask the questions that never occurred to me. Thank you to all four of you and Rick (Group Five Forever!) for that lovely surprise baby shower halfway through our program, and thank you, Maida, for sparing some time in quantitative methods to make that happen. Hanna, thank you for your kind calls and texts—your finish line is in sight! Thank you also to Cohort Two—especially Jaimie, Araina, and Susan—for surprising me with the very useful pack-and-play (when Shay grew tall enough to climb out of it, we continued to use it as a barricade to block her entrance to the kitchen!).

Nancy, thank you for knowing more than I did what an amazing opportunity this Ed.D. program would be for me. I would most certainly not be here without your gentle suggestion, and I cannot begin to say how greatly my life has been impacted during my time here as a doctoral student. Thank you to all of the faculty members who've taught me over the past four years—this program is truly special. Because of you, I feel I'm not only a stronger scholar and a more dedicated educator, but also, a better person.

Thank you to the rest of my family and friends, especially Johnny, Kristen, Billy, Grandma Joyce, Randy, Mandy, Richard, Melissa, Kristin, Justin, WizB, and Lydia. Thanks to the Cottage Crew for their support, also, especially Brent and Tom, who helped make the beginning of my doctoral journey financially possible by generously offering to employ me, working around my graduate assistantship conditions and obligations. To all of the staff who experienced the full-time doctoral student, third-trimester-pregnant version of Jenny as your team leader, thank you for your patience. To my most recent regular Cottage co-workers, Shawn, Will, Jenn, and Charisse, and to all of our regulars, thank you for being a source of laughter and great times, and Melanie, thank you for giving me a chance to work with such a fun group.

Thank you, Beth, Sheila, and Suzi, for choosing me to join your work family—teaching at Wor-Wic is a great honor, and I am thrilled to work with our students each and every day. Thank you to the three of you and Renee, Chuck, Adam, Juley, and everyone else who went out of their way to make me feel like a welcome addition. I also need to acknowledge Beth and Sheila for sharing their insights from their own doctoral journeys with me, and I would like to thank several Wor-Wic administrators whose constant support and encouragement, along with that of my department, truly showed me

that I am valued as a teacher and a scholar: Dr. Colleen Dallam, Dr. Stephen Capelli, Dr. Dornell Woolford, and Dr. Kristin Mallory. A special thank you to my incredible students, past, present, and future. Here's a shout out to Tiara, April, Josh M., Ashleigh, Janae, Caila, John, Hye Soo, Shymaar, Ka'mya, Bailey, Taylor, Marissa, Sophie, Deja, Amina, Davon, Tyrone, Sean, Adam, Katie, Sydney, Dario, Lizz, Amber, Maggie, Jessie, T'keyah, Tina, Josh C., and Koran, who are just a few of the reasons why I love being a teacher.

Thank you to my church family, the amazing folks at Oak Ridge Baptist. I am especially grateful to the 12:00 guest services team who often prayed for my success with me and for me each week. Thank you for your prayers, too, Pastor Gary, and to Pastor Brian, Miss Lisa, and everyone else who encouraged me, be it through prayer, supportive words or just your smiling, familiar faces.

I am thankful also for the profound influence of those loved ones I've lost, including Schelita, Aunt Doris (Aunt Daw-uhs), Aunt Betty, Jasmine Celine, Poppop, and of course, Dad. I can't wait to hug each of you in heaven.

Finally, thank you so much to my participants. Obviously, this work would not exist if not for you. I also need to thank Jade, Jasmine, Kyra, and Courtney, who were not eligible for participation in this study, but made valuable contributions along the way and had huge roles in shaping my vision for this project as I began to conceive of research designs. Most of all, though, to the nine women and men who participated in this dissertation study: Thank you so much for your honesty, and for your willingness to share, even when it may have been painful or uncomfortable to do so. Thank you for allowing me to read your writing and discuss your worlds with you. Each of you are

incredibly talented and ambitious—I cannot wait to hear of your future accomplishments. Thank you for letting me into your lives, and for allowing me to communicate your experiences to this scholarly audience. I hope my work does the beauty and complexity of your perspectives justice.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case study research design examined the ways in which multiracial emergent adult college students engaged in identity work in and out of formal educational contexts. Through case studies of nine students at three higher education institutions (an open-admissions community college, a Historically Black University, and a four-year, public Predominantly White Institution with more selective entrance requirements), I sought to understand how participants used composing practices to express, negotiate, establish, explore and/or refute racial and other identities, thus adding to the literature on multiracial college students' experiences in a variety of campus contexts. The focus on composing practices in formal educational contexts revealed some of the ways that educators and academic assignments assisted and encouraged as well as hindered and suppressed these students in engaging in racial (and other) identity work through writing; the examination of composing done outside of such contexts explored similarities and differences in the ways that participants engaged their racial identities as they wrote for different purposes and audiences. Data sources included semi-structured interviews, samples of writing and other compositions self-selected by participants, and reflective journals that offered both records of one week's worth of participants' composing practices and their written responses to questions designed to allow them to consider how their compositions allowed or denied them opportunities to engage in identity work. Findings suggested that participants engaged in racial identity work selectively and overtly through composing practices, at times transcending singular or even multiple racial identities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	viii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
CHAPTER I. NOT BLACK AND WHITE: A PROBLEM OF PRACTICE	1
Problem of Practice.....	3
Background: Landscape of Multiracial Identity Work.....	5
Purpose of Study.....	7
Positionality.....	11
Key Terms.....	14
Limitations.....	16
CHAPTER II. STORIES OF IDENTITY: RACE, WRITING, AND EMERGING SELVES (A LITERATURE REVIEW)	19
Expressions of the Self: Writing as Identity Performance In and Out of Formal Educational Contexts.....	20
Composing practices: What are they?.....	20
Identity work through composing practices in formal educational contexts.....	22
Identity work through composing practices outside of formal educational contexts.....	27
Race & Identity.....	31

Racial identity.....	31
Identity.....	31
Multiracial identity.....	33
Writers of Color: Identity Negotiation, Exploration, & Expression.....	34
Why Emergent Adults?.....	56
CHAPTER III. IN SEARCH OF MULTIRACIAL EXPRESSIONS OF IDENTITY:	
METHODS.....	58
Overview of Research Design.....	59
Theoretical Framework.....	62
Research Setting.....	63
Participants.....	64
Somerco Community college participants.....	70
<i>Kya</i>	70
<i>Michael</i>	71
<i>Gabby</i>	73
Kensington University participants.....	74
<i>David</i>	74
<i>Armona</i>	75
<i>Emma</i>	76
University of Bay South participants.....	77
<i>Leila</i>	77
<i>Taylor</i>	79
<i>Brandee</i>	80

Data Sources.....	81
Semi-structured interviews.....	82
Writing samples.....	83
Identity reflection journaling activity.....	86
Data Analysis.....	88
Quality Assurances.....	91
CHAPTER IV. TO WRITE (OR NOT) ABOUT (MY) RACE? THAT IS THE QUESTION.....	94
“I Know Who I Am”: Themes of Identity Work.....	98
Selectivity: “If,” “When,” & “Which”.....	100
The question of “if”: “If I’m just gonna shoot off my mouth, I’m no better than they are.”.....	101
The question of “when”: “It doesn’t matter who I am.”.....	112
<i>In the classroom: “Staying true to myself but still trying to be MLA.”</i>	112
<i>Social media contexts: “Who wants to argue with someone on Twitter? On Facebook?” vs. “I can convey the severity of what I feel.”</i>	120
<i>Beyond school walls & evolution in “when”: “What if I shared my view?”</i>	123
The question of “which”: “I belong to the African-American race because of my parents’ upbringing.”.....	125
Selectivity across campus contexts.....	130

<i>Somerco</i>	130
<i>Kensington</i>	132
<i>University of Bay South</i>	136
Overt Racial Identity Work.....	140
Leila: “Damn, who am I?”.....	141
Taylor: “You can’t really speak on race and stuff like that, because you’re not all the way Black.”.....	144
Emma: “I don’t really know what I am.”.....	146
Transcending Race: “I’m Human.”.....	149
CHAPTER V. TRADING “COLORFUL SILENCE” FOR A BLENDED TOMORROW.....	156
Selectivity: Facilitating Empowering Circumstances.....	160
Significance of Overt Racial Identity Work through Composing Practices.....	168
Why Transcendence Matters.....	173
Beyond Transcendence: Transformation.....	178
REFERENCES.....	185
APPENDICES.....	202
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLIER.....	203
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL.....	204
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM.....	205
APPENDIX D: INSTRUCTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS FOR SELECTING WRITING SAMPLES.....	207
APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS.....	208

APPENDIX F: INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING WRITTEN REFLECTION.....	210
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LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
Table 1. Participants.....	69
Table 2. Description of Data Sources.....	82
Table 3. Overview of Writing Samples.....	85

CHAPTER I

Not Black and White: A Problem of Practice

“To them, it’s acceptable to be one or the other, but if you’re mixed, it’s just for some reason, that’s an anomaly, like, that is not acceptable in their world.”—David

I am a writer.

I can’t tell you exactly when I began thinking of myself in such terms, but I am sure it was very early on in the general scheme of things. As someone who has always thrived in writing, I have a deep appreciation for the possibilities offered to me when it comes time to put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard. I can present myself however I want, for whatever purpose I so desire. The me in an argumentative essay is a very different me than the one I write into existence when I compose a poem for my husband. Likewise, the self I write into a cover letter when I’m on the job market represents a very different self than does the voice that comes through when I give permanence to a funny memory that I’ve captured through a short story.

As a current and former educator to a variety of students—middle and high schoolers, undergraduates at a four-year university, developmental community college students, K-12 creative writers attending a summer writing camp, teacher candidates—I have had the pleasure of encountering thousands of “discoursal selves” (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010) inscribed into texts written by several hundred students throughout the decade and a half I’ve been teaching. In my leisure time, I’ve witnessed some of those same students write numerous (and often radically different) discoursal selves into existence outside of the classroom. Through Facebook, I’ve had a front row seat as some of my former students have used composing practices online to proclaim diverse identities, some of which matched my visions of who they were through their classroom

writing, some of which showed no trace of the selves present in their academic writings, but were more in line with my sense of who they were through interactions via speech and behaviors in classroom life. Some of those online identities, though, were in stark contrast to the young men and women who wrote persuasive essays and personal journal entries for me to read, or the ones who sat cooperatively (if not excitedly) in my English 10 classrooms.

I can vividly remember a Facebook post of one young woman who had been a student in my tenth-grade English class years before. “Not every black man is innocent and not every white cop is crooked,” she wrote eloquently, before going on to position herself as, in her own words, a “mixed” woman of “African-American” and “Caucasian” descent. She described the racially charged Baltimore riot of 2015 as disgusting, and ended her post with a plea for her audience to embrace compassion and respect as they reacted in writing to the news and subsequent comments on their Facebook feeds.

Her post struck me and stayed with me for a few reasons. First of all, as a White woman with a Black husband and daughters who I consider both Black and White, I wondered what it was like for this student: a biracial woman reading many posts (authored, for the most part, by monoracial Facebook friends) that were divisive and, in her words, “ignorant.” Positioning herself as someone who knew “my history on both sides,” she wrote with authority, using her positionality as a tool to reach across racial lines to get her audience to consider her words. I applauded her for taking the initiative to use her racial identity to try and reach out to those who might think differently than she.

But also, my heart ached for her. Scrolling through her Facebook newsfeed that day, had she seen no other voices similar to hers? Her post certainly suggested an “us” and “them” sort of context, one which included no room for someone to be “both.”

This exclusionary textual exchange led me to reflect on the ways that, as Knaus (2006) has pointed out,

Multiracial people have not been accounted for in social science literature in general, and more specifically have not been addressed in educational conversations surrounding race and racism. Typically, those living at the margins are ignored, but just as typically, those marginalized often have the most to illuminate about our hidden assumptions. (pp. 14)

Thus, I began reflecting on how problematic it is that multiracial voices are nearly absent within the literature on race and education, particularly because, as my former student’s Facebook post suggested, such voices certainly seem to have much to illuminate. I find it especially troublesome that the multiracial student experience is understudied in the larger context of education and in my particular field, literacy, especially given today’s current political climate, which I see as dangerously intolerant.

Problem of Practice

Having been inspired by that Facebook post to study the ways that multiracial individuals engage in identity work through writing and other composing practices, I seek to add multiracial voices to the academic literature regarding race, identity, and writing. I find it worrisome that America presumes monoraciality (Knaus, 2006)—a narrow-minded assumption which certainly has the power to shape the experiences multiracial students undergo in classrooms in both K-12 and higher education settings. Literature suggests that multiracial students are an understudied population in both of these contexts (Williams, 2009; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Brunsma, 2005; Kellogg & Liddell,

2012); however, my current position as a college literacy instructor and my interest in the identity work people perform during “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000) have led me to desire to explore how multiracial college students engage in identity work through their composing practices.

While people of all ages engage in identity work through a variety of composing practices (Hansen, 2014; Cover, 2012; Capello, 2006; Bolton, 2011; Merchant, 2005), the period known as emerging adulthood is of particular interest because research has shown that for those who are at the cusp of adulthood, “Identity formation involves trying out various life possibilities and gradually moving toward making enduring decisions... this process begins in adolescence but takes place mainly in emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Coining the phase of development that occurs roughly between the ages of 18-25 “emergent adulthood,” Arnett argues that worldviews are often formulated, questioned, and solidified during this time period. For many multiracial students, this “trying out” of life possibilities includes decisions about racial identities (Renn, 1998, 2000, 2008; Root, 2004; Liebler, Porter, Fernandez, Noon, & Ennis, 2017; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002).

In examining existing scholarship, I found no studies utilizing multiple case design to explore the ways that writing and other composing practices were used by multiracial students to engage in identity work. Therefore, I designed a multiple case study to examine multiracial emergent adult students’ composing practices at three different research sites: a Historically Black University (HBU), an open-admissions community college, and a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)—a public university with more selective entrance requirements. My research adds to the growing body of

literature regarding multiracial identity; moreover, this study's focus on the composing practices of multiracial college students contributes to the field of literacy by disrupting assumptions of monoracial normality in our classrooms. Furthermore, pedagogical implications for a diverse range of students are likely to be gained from considering multiracial students' perspectives and exploring the ways that my participants engaged in identity work in and out of formal educational contexts.

Background: Landscape of Multiracial Identity Work

Emergent adulthood may be a particularly trying time for multiracial students. Arnett (2000) argues that this is the period of time in our lives in which we actively try out different possibilities as we consider who we want to be, making decisions that are likely to last the rest of our lives during this time period. We all ask ourselves questions of who we want to be regarding many aspects of our lives as we enter and move through emergent adulthood, but multiracial individuals may have additional questions that the monoracial majority does not have to ask themselves. In the words of Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, and Peck, society "provides multiracial individuals with no easy answers about where they belong in terms of racial communities" (2007, p. 125). In recent months, the tense political climate surrounding race relationships in America has perhaps exacerbated this inquiry for the millions of students in our country who identify with more than one racial heritage. Increasingly divisive rhetoric in the era of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and election, renewed attention to race in the contexts of high-profile police brutality cases, racially charged national policies on immigration: These discordant racial issues have, in part, defined this time, as they have sparked national conversations (both oral and written) that often presume monoracial affiliation.

Shih, Bonam, et. al continue:

multiracial individuals have been forced to come up with these answers [regarding racial belonging] on their own. Thus, they have to grapple with questions surrounding race that many monoracial individuals, both from majority and minority groups, have had answered for them by society. (pp. 125)

While we all grapple with issues concerning identity, the above quote illustrates the complexity of racial identity for students who embrace two or more racial heritages. As young people reach emergent adulthood status, multiracial individuals often must make decisions about their racial identities. Will they embrace all aspects of their racial heritages? Will society, peers, or family determine whether or not they identify with one or more of their racial identities above others? In an America that seems increasingly divided by race, are multiracial young people able to transcend such divisions? Or do classifications of “us” and “them” leave those who are “both” or “multiple” unsure where to turn?

Rollins (2006) asks how multiracial individuals “balance the love of their families with the anger of a world that sees them in a completely racialized way, and reacts to them in direct relation to this stereotype” (p. xi). Composing texts can be a means of identity exploration; various scholars have shown how composing practices such as writing in school (Capello, 2006; Ryan, 2014), blogging (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), posting on Social Networking Sites (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard 2013), and participating in digital writing exchanges (Merchant, 2005) can be a means of negotiating identity. So perhaps multiracial students’ composing practices provide rich opportunities for these individuals to navigate their complex identity journeys. If this is so, instructors may benefit from understanding how this occurs, both in and out of formal educational

contexts. What can we learn from exploring the ways in which multiracial students grapple with their identities through their composing practices, and how can this knowledge help us to improve literacy instruction for diverse student populations?

Purpose of Study

As previously mentioned, when I write, I decide which “self” I will write into a text. Sometimes this decision feels very intentional; other times the inscription of myself into a text is more of a subconscious process. In either case, writing can be an opportunity to try on, reject, maintain, explore, elaborate on, or imagine any number of identities (Ryan, 2014; Burgess, & Ivanič, 2010; Beach, Johnston, & Haertling Thein, 2015). I know this as an academic, as a creative writer, as a memoirist, as a blogger, as a teacher who watches students’ writing evolve (or not) through multiple drafts. In thinking about my former student’s Facebook post, I wondered how writing and other compositions created in and outside of formal educational contexts allow multiracial students to engage in similar or vastly different identity work, particularly in regards to racial identity. This wondering echoes questions in the field of literacy regarding the role of racial identity when it comes to writing; multiracial students are a particularly understudied population in general, and literacy instruction is no exception to this (Knaus, 2006).

In times of heated debates concerning race, a critical inquiry of how racial identity is manifested through the composing practices of multiracial students may offer educators and other interested parties insight as to how individuals position themselves—and are positioned by others—through writing and other composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts. Even prior to numerous high profile cases of police

brutality against people of color and bolder acts of racism given media attention in the era of Trump's presidency, research suggested that multiracial voices were often marginalized and multiracial student experiences were rarely considered by educators (Renn, 1998, 2000, 2003; Knaus, 2006; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Given our current and often polarizing national conversations regarding race, many of which are published online through text and other media, I felt it important to take advantage of the opportunity to study the ways multiracial students engaged in identity work through composing practices.

As access to communication via the advanced technology of social media progresses rapidly, pulling diverse and numerous individuals into conversations spanning a great many sensitive topics, I sought to examine the ways that individuals who identify as biracial or multiracial used such platforms to engage in identity work through their composing practices; I was equally interested in how writing and other compositions created by multiracial college students in the context of their coursework suggested the absence or presence of opportunities for such identity work. Finally, I wondered how students were using other types of writing or compositions outside of formal educational contexts to engage in identity work.

Not long ago, Obama's 2008 election to the presidency led some recent scholars to hopefully proclaim that we had reached a truly colorblind society; Parks and Rachlinski (2009) summarize this view, but maintain that implicit, even unconscious, racism in America remains a problem in the new millennium. Disturbing racial incidents and dialogue in recent times since have made it apparent that in addition to implicit forms of racism, explicit occurrences are also very real and very dangerous.

In this racialized society, to deny our students' racial identities is to ignore the reality of our country's history as well as our current struggles. Brunsma and Rockquemore (2001) found that for multiracial students, "An individual's social context seems to be a crucial component in the relation between phenotype and socially perceived appearance as well as in how these two factors influence identity" (p. 44). So even if we as teachers don't want to think race matters, to refuse to acknowledge racial identities is to naively engage with our students—they (and we) are living in a world in which race does very much matter.

Ideally, our classrooms—particularly higher education classrooms, given emergent adults' needs to be able to explore various aspects of their identities—should be safe spaces in which biracial and multiracial students have the ability to seek answers to some of the questions raised above. Educators today should strive to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, as Nieto (2010) claims that "teachers' thinking about the identities, previous knowledge, and experiences of their students relates very directly to the kinds of practices and climate they create for learning" (p. 39). Nieto calls for us to recognize our students' unique identities in order to create inclusive environments in which all students can succeed. Going a step further, not only should we value students' diverse identities and experiences, we should seek to develop an understanding of how our students are constantly engaging in identity work. Such an understanding is crucial to consider as we plan instruction and create assignments.

As an English instructor who teaches developmental courses at a community college, I teach a racially diverse array of students, many of whom identify with more than one race. I often wonder if educators—including myself—are succeeding in

creating opportunities for multiracial students to engage in identity work through writing, or if, perhaps, students are finding such opportunities for themselves in composing practices outside of formal coursework. This study was designed to help educators understand the ways in which multiracial students engage in such identity work. I wanted to examine what overlap in the navigation of racial identities through writing both in and out of formal educational contexts might exist. Alternatively, I wondered if these literacy contexts function in more binary ways, privileging or denying only certain forms of performing racial identity through writing? Because research indicates that racial identities and literacy practices are interrelated (Kirkland, 2013; Grantham & Ford, 2003), that teachers would be better equipped to teach diverse students if they better understood students' racial identities (Kirkland, 2013), and because there have been no multiple case study research designs which have examined how multiracial college students engage in identity work through writing, my study sought to contribute to the field by exploring how multiracial identity work was being performed through composing practices.

These considerations led me to my main research question: How do multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts? The following four sub-questions, all related to the overarching question, guided the study:

- 1) How do multiracial emergent adult college students describe their identities as they experience them in their composing practices?

- 2) How do texts composed in and out of formal educational contexts authored by multiracial emergent adult college students communicate authors' racial and other identities to their intended audiences?
- 3) What role does campus context play in the ways that multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices at three different contexts: An open-admissions community college, a Historically Black University, and a more selective, Predominantly White Institution within the same geographic region?
- 4) In what ways do various literacy contexts privilege or deny the expression of racialized identities for multiracial emergent adult college students?

Positionality

I am a monoracial White woman married to a Black man, and I am the proud mother of two daughters whose identical skin tones demonstrate our interracial union. To America, my children are people of color. I must disclose that I sincerely hope my children choose to identify as biracial: I'd like to believe that my husband and I are raising them to relate to and value both of their racial backgrounds. However, as will be further discussed in Chapter Two, I feel that it is my girls' right to freely choose their own racial identities. Still, that freedom is inevitably limited by the world's messages to them. Based on their skin color, society will view them as people of color, so it is likely that they will identify with the Black aspect of their racial identities. I hope they also choose to embrace the White side of their racial background, by which I mean, I hope they will not be ashamed of me or my family and our predominantly German and English heritage. Furthermore, it is my sincere hope that they do not feel boxed into liking particular

activities, sports, music or clothing based on America's shallow conceptions of race. I do not want their interests to be dictated by stereotypes. Rather, I hope that they feel complete support from our family as they journey into adulthood and choose paths that excite them and bring them joy.

Even as we encourage our children to develop healthy racial identities, socially constructed reality demands that my daughters answer the "What are you?" question. I know that not all people of two or more distinct racial backgrounds end up identifying with more than one race. For this reason, I viewed self-identification as biracial or multiracial as an essential criterion for participants who desired to be involved in this study. As I wished to examine the ways that multiracial students engaged in identity work, I felt that self-identification with more than one race would allow for a more concentrated exploration of multiracial identity as it is embedded in composing practices.

Clearly, my experiences and beliefs as a mother drive my interest in this research project. Thus, it is important to recognize that I approach this project with a vested personal interest; I tend to look for positive and uplifting conceptions of multiraciality in the world around me. As Bourke (2014) stated, "the researcher's beliefs, political stance [and] cultural background...are important variables that may affect the research process" (p. 2). So it is with my project. Having acknowledged my bias, I endeavored to participate in data analysis in as reflexive a manner as possible, knowing complete impartiality would be an impossibility. My personal experiences shape not only the way I view data, but the way I perceive the world around me. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the measures I took to prevent my biases from focusing solely on data that confirmed my own views.

Like Bourke (another White researcher who works with people of color), I believe “my work has to reflect the voices of those who participate in research” (p. 3). Because my Whiteness and my advanced education privilege me in certain ways, I took measures to prevent “othering” my participants and speaking for them; instead, I strived to allow their own voices to be heard. My intents as a researcher are summarized by Smith (2006), who writes that there are “researchers, scholars and academics who actively choose the margins, who choose to study people marginalised by society... who see their intellectual purpose as being scholars who will work for, with and alongside communities who occupy the margins of society” (p. 6). In attempting to work for, with, and alongside the multiracial participants in this study, I employed measures to prevent my racial and educational backgrounds from othering my participants. These will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Finally, my passion for writing leads me to believe that writing is an important communicative tool, one which I believe we all use to express various aspects of our identities. While it may have been easy for me to overestimate the role participants’ writing practices play in their identity work, I took care to structure interviews in such a way as to focus on the ways participants saw writing as instrumental (or not) to the ways they projected their desired selves to their readers. Member checking, reflexive memoing (Pelias, 2011) and using multiple data sources to confirm findings was extremely important to the integrity of this work, as these quality assurances helped me maintain an awareness of how my interests and positionality might have otherwise prevented me from seeking out complex nuances in data beyond my initial gravitations.

Key Terms

Several key terms are important to understanding this study; these include *multiracial*, *racial identity*, *identity*, *emergent adult*, and *composing practices* (those undertaken *in and out of formal educational contexts*).

When it comes to concepts of race and identity pertaining to this study, the first term necessary to operationalize is *multiracial*, as the purpose of this research is to explore experiences of multiracial college students. *Multiracial*, as I draw from Davis' (2009) definition, includes any person who self-identifies as having more than one racial heritage; this term includes people who claim a biracial identity. Because multiraciality is inclusive of biracial individuals, from here on, biracial participants will be referred to as multiracial, except in instances when I use participants' own wording to describe themselves.

A *multiracial* identity is one *racial identity* that may be selected or rejected (or both, as research shows that individuals may sometimes identify as multiracial and sometimes not) by those whose parents are from multiple racial backgrounds (Root, 2004; Garrod, Kilkenny,& Gómez, 2014; Liebler, et. al, 2017). A person's *racial identity* is the perception (s)he has of sharing common heritage with a particular race of people (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999).

The literature on *identity* is broad and spans across numerous scholarly fields; for my study's purposes, I view *identity* as a series of performative acts (Butler, 1998; Merchant, 2005): we engage in identity work when we interact with others in the world around us, assuming particular identities by acting in certain ways. In the words of

Merchant, we are all authors “in the production and performance of identity” (2005, p. 303).

Furthermore, I am using the concept of *emergent adulthood* (Arnett, 2000) to place parameters around participants’ ages. Emergent adults are those who are between 18 and their mid-twenties; this label refers to a particular time period in early adult life during which world views are formed and solidified; such a fascinating period in identity exploration justifies this study’s inclusion of college students within this age group.

To understand this study, it is also necessary to define what is meant by *composing practices* and the terms I use to explain the contexts in which they occur. *Composing practices* as they are referred to in this dissertation indicate any acts in which students create texts, which would include traditional texts such as written documents (electronic and hand-written), multimedia texts that may contain visual, audio, and/or textual elements, and oral texts such as songs or raps. I decided on the term *composing practices* as I have a strong interest in traditional student writing, but also wanted to include other texts students create that are meaningful to their lives. As we live in a multimodal society, modern students often rely on sign-systems and other means of communication which may or may not utilize written words to achieve their purposes. Vasudevan, Shultz, and Bateman (2010) put it like this: “Contexts that are rich with multiple modalities provide... opportunities to develop and express... identities across the production of multiple kinds of texts that represent a variety of stories and use a range of modalities” (p. 447). To include these sorts of texts as well as samples of traditional student writing, I employed the term *composing practices* in an attempt to capture any and all compositions my participants wished to discuss with me. This term was

previously used in case-study research by Yi, whose (2007) work “Engaging Literacy: A Biliterate Student’s Composing Practices Beyond School” explored the diversely rich compositions of one Korean high school student beyond her classroom context; Vasudevan, et. al (2010) also used the term to refer to a variety of multimodal forms text creation can entail in an ethnographic study of a classroom.

In formal educational contexts indicates that a composing practice was undertaken to fulfill the expectation of an instructor—for example, composing in response to a course assignment; this phrase can also refer to less formal compositions students engage in such as note-taking or any other writing or composing for official coursework.

On the other hand, *Out of formal educational contexts* covers any writing or other composition (such as multimodal social media posts, oral texts like freestyle raps, and visual artwork such as drawings and illustrations) created by students for any reason other than purposes related to coursework.

Limitations

According to Stake (2005), case study research is suitable for studying a phenomenon in its natural context. Based on this description, I see multiple case study as a valuable research design for exploring what it means to be a multiracial college student engaging in identity work through composing practices. However, I do not attempt to make any claims about producing generalizable findings from this proposed study; such an outcome is not the purpose of case study research, as argued for by Flyvbjerg (2011), who claims that the value of case study research is not based on formal generalization. He notes that,

formal generalization, be it on the basis of large samples or single cases, is considerably overrated... That knowledge cannot be formally generalized does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or in a society (2011, pp. 305).

In this tradition, I hope that the cases examined here encourage practitioners to engage with their unique students in ways that are particular to their students' needs—this study, though focused on racial identity, offers insights to a variety of educators who work with diverse student populations by exploring how nine students engaged in identity work through writing. Though I cannot claim that my findings are representative of *the multiracial college student experience*, I would be skeptical of any study that claims to equivocate an entire people group's complex navigation of racial identity into a singular experience. Furthermore, though the literature on multiracial identity development suggests that this ongoing process is in many ways significantly different than that which monoracial peers of color undergo, (Tatum, 1997; Root, 2004), because “constructing our identities is a complex process for all of us,” (Tatum, 1997, p. 167), there are surely implications to consider for all students, both racially and in terms of other identity explorations for which writing may serve as a means of facilitating.

Time was also a limitation—I aimed to structure the interviews over the course of a single semester, in an attempt to retain participants by preventing withdrawal from the study due to changes in enrollment status at their campus or in courses that required writing. Completing data collection within such a time constraint limited my engagement in the field, but the design limitations faced through collecting nearly all data within a single academic semester were countered by designing for breadth, as I included nine participants. According to Chmiliar (2010), multiple-case design is “more powerful than single-case designs as it provides more extensive descriptions and explanations of the

phenomenon or issue” (p. 4). Designing for breadth, while still not allowing me to produce generalizable findings, allowed me a plethora of data from which to explore my research question, thus minimizing the impact that time constraints posed in terms of depth across cases.

CHAPTER II

Stories of Identity: Race, Writing, and Emerging Selves (A Literature Review)

“Maybe we should broaden our horizons and look into other races...” –Taylor

The multiracial population of the United States is one of the fastest growing demographic groups in our country (Brunsma, 2005; Paladino & Davis, 2006; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Lee & Bean, 2016). The drastic increase in interracial marriages and the rising number of people who choose to identify with more than one racial heritage has led to more multiracial college students than ever before (Renn, 2000; Paladino & Davis, 2006). However, scholars agree that research is desperately needed to understand the experiences and needs of these students. Renn (2000) writes, “Despite significant and increasing numbers of biracial and multiracial students, almost nothing is known about their development and interactions in the college environment” (p. 399). Paladino and Davis (2006) echo these concerns, noting that “many colleges and universities are not prepared to acknowledge, assist, and attend to the needs of these students as they matriculate through their education tenure” (p. 20). Kellogg and Liddell (2012) agree, maintaining that despite multiracial students’ “growing presence, there is still much to be learned about the ways that multiracial identity is understood by students within the unique context of colleges and universities” (p. 524).

Kellogg and Liddell highlight an important challenge for college educators who work in diverse contexts: seeking to understand how our multiracial students grapple with identity may assist us in creating learning environments that disrupt monoracial notions of normality. Indeed, all students’ identities are always an important consideration: academics have long recognized the dimensions of identity work inherent in course content, particularly in disciplines that require students to express themselves

through writing (Hyland, 2002; Williams, 2006; Beach et. al, 2015). While research does suggest that writing can be a means of identity exploration for people of color, there have not yet been any multiple case study research designs examining the ways that multiracial students engage in identity work through composing practices. What follows is a review of related research that shows how writing and other composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts have the potential to engage students in identity work. I then briefly provide background information regarding theories of race and identity that are relevant to this study before reviewing existing research on the composing practices of students of color. Finally, I conclude with why the literature suggests that emergent adulthood is a particularly fascinating period of life to study identity work.

Expressions of the Self: Writing as Identity Performance In and Out of Formal Educational Contexts

Composing practices: What are they? Composing practices are those acts in which a person creates any sort of text. Like Shannahan, “I argue for a more expansive view of writing to include other sign systems as mediating tools to develop higher psychological functions” (2013, p. 196). Despite technological advances in an increasingly visual and multimodal society, formal academic contexts continue to “privilege words as the primary meaning-making mode” (Shannahan, 2013, p. 196). While I do not seek to discount the importance of words in the creation of a variety of compositions, I embrace Shannahan’s “more expansive view of writing,” which means I am conceiving texts as not limited to handwritten and electronic documents which express meaning through written language—but as also taking additional forms that may or may not contain words. I recognize that modern students, while still engaging in

traditional composing practices such as drafting essays for a college course, or scribbling poetry into a journal for personal reasons, are also frequently involved in the production of multimedia texts that may contain visual, audio, and/or textual elements, as well as oral texts such as songs or raps.

I opted to use the term *composing practices* as I continue to be aware of the importance of students' needs for mastering traditional genres of writing both in classroom and professional contexts, but I also wanted to include other texts students create that are meaningful to their lives. The term I've selected appears in the following chapter title, "Remix, Play, and Remediation: Undertheorized Composing Practices," (Davis, Webb, Lackey, & DeVoss, 2010), and though never explicitly defined by the authors, they go on to posit that "remixing, rewriting, rescripting, and redelivering work in digital spaces" (p. 187) are valued and common forms of writing that occur in multiple contexts. In digital space, Davis et. al argue, these types of compositions constitute "a dominant composing paradigm" (p. 188). The term has also been used to reference the habitual activities student writers engage in when it comes to more traditional writing practices, as was seen in the work of Dyson, who used the phrase *composing practices* to describe both "official" school writing activities and "unofficial" composing acts in an elementary setting (2013).

As we live in a multimodal society, modern students typically rely on sign-systems and other means of communication which may or may not utilize written words to achieve their purposes. Vasudevan explains, "school-sanctioned literacy, defined by an arbitrary standard, is often at the center of school labeling practices. But that standard's function is out of sync with the worlds" that young people read and write in

beyond classroom walls (2006, p. 252). She makes a call for educators to “make heard the voices, images, words, and worlds” of their students (p. 256). I see my study as a reply to that call.

In an effort to respond to Vasudevan’s (2006) invitation, my study includes these sorts of texts as well as samples of traditional student writing, as selected by the participants. I make use of the term *composing practices* as Dyson (2013) did: all inclusively. I see *composing practices* as a way to encompass any and every sort of text my participants wished to discuss with me; I selected this term in part because the word *practice* connotes a routineness or a habitualness of which I hoped to gain a sense of through collecting multiple writing samples and discussing participants’ preferences regarding composing. There is precedence when it comes to using this term in case-study research: Yi (2007) studies the composing practices of one Korean high school student outside of her formal educational context; Ranker (2009) uses the term to describe his observations of students incorporating suggested writing strategies into their own composing activities, and Brass (2008) also mentions the phrase in discussing the school-based value assigned to only certain literacies in a case study of a Latino teenager’s experience in an afterschool program.

Identity work through composing practices in formal educational contexts.

The presence of identity in writing assignments and other forms of composing in formal educational contexts is established by Beach et. al (2015), who argue that composition classrooms are “always already a space for identity work” because “from a sociocultural perspective, identities are performed, mediated, sedimented, and disrupted through language, narrative, discourse, embodied performances, and digital forms of

communication” (p. 6). By introducing students to opportunities to engage in identity work through writing, assignments and activities in composition courses have the potential to allow or encourage, (or, conversely, limit) students’ abilities to participate in identity work within formal educational contexts.

Much of the writing produced in students’ coursework is often thought to be void of identity. Yancey (2009) argues that throughout the historical development of the field of composition, writing as an academic subject has been conceived of as a set of rudimentary skills, inseparable from the testing cultures of American classrooms, and far removed from the writing that people do for actual purposes outside of school. Scherff & Piazza (2005), through their survey research of nearly 2000 Florida school students, concluded that “that the curriculum caused teachers to sacrifice ‘personal’ aspects of English language arts” (p. 287). Applebee & Langer (2009), after reviewing thirty plus years of NAEP assessment data, suggest that schools are trending toward focusing writing instruction on “how to best answer particular types of test questions” (p. 26).

Valenzuela critiques this sort of instruction and assessment, cautioning

against an overreliance on these measures and thus their reification as the driving force behind a quality education. As scholars, it is our responsibility to ground our assessments in the social and political realities of the communities that schools serve (2002, pp. 239).

Yet, most often, the kinds of writing tasks, instruction, and assessments that today’s students are experiencing are representative of those Valenzuela criticizes.

The types of writing described above have been characterized as “uniformly faceless” (Hyland, 2002, p. 352). However, Williams (2006) offers a striking insight regarding implicit identity present in academic forms of writing where the standard academic “voice” is supposedly formal, objective, and standardized; maintaining that,

“There is no writing, not a scholarly article, a newspaper editorial, or a technical manual, that does not carry with it an identity of the author” (p. 712). Williams goes on to explain that the aforementioned examples differ only from texts that more explicitly project identities because they imply identities assumed by readers. He argues that in academic writing, these implied identities represent

our cultural default setting of whom we assume the author to be. In the West, there is a cultural image of the scientist as a white man in a labcoat (or in the humanities, as a white man in a tweed jacket). That image, of course, is not the reality; but it is the dominant image. (pp. 712)

This cultural default image of a White man has obvious implications for students of color, including many multiracial students. If the default image is White, are students of color sacrificing elements of their identities by participating in school-sanctioned writing activities? Are multiracial students who have ties to Whiteness asked to mask certain aspects of their identities in order to participate? Even if one were to argue that academic writing pieces do not conjure up the images that Williams describes above, educators and students who conform to genre expectations of Mainstream American English (MAE) are participating in a practice that values certain linguistic acts above others; adherence to such rules reflects the ideology of the (White) culture of power (Delpit, 1995).

In striving for (White conceptions of) neutrality and objectivity, academic writing often discourages or forbids writers from disclosing personal information about themselves within a text, or even referencing themselves through the use of first-person pronouns. However, Hyland (2002) found that in a corpus-analysis of 270 published journal articles, expressions of identity via personal pronouns were much more common in scholarly writing than one might think, though frequency varied significantly

depending on the field of study. Hyland maintains that we “concentrate our efforts on helping students manage the presentation of their information before managing their presentation of themselves. But increasingly we are learning that such interpersonal aspects of writing are not simply an optional extra” (p. 357). Hyland calls for educators to reject the concept of academic writing as uniformly impersonal, and to equip students to effectively negotiate the presentation of their identities through scholarly writing. He argues that writers must choose words to

present their ideas in ways that make most sense to their readers, and part of this involves adopting an appropriate identity... almost everything we write says something about us and the sort of relationship that we want to set up with our readers... The author’s explicit appearance in a text, or its absence, works to create a plausible academic identity, and a voice with which to present an argument. (pp. 352)

Ryan (2014) reached a similar conclusion. In a study predicated upon conceptualizing writing as a performance of identity, Ryan examines student writing in two culturally and linguistically diverse schools, following her findings with a call for teachers to make students more aware of the discursal choices available to them as they develop writing identities. Ryan’s study found that students’ writing identities could be categorized in one of three ways, which she described using the following labels: “school writer,” “constrained writer,” or “reflexive writer.” She argues that the formulaic approach to writing pedagogy and the standardized assessments that drive instruction have weighed heavily on the students’ formulations of these identities, which reflect, to varying degrees, the ways that the writers have incorporated school-based strategies and structures into their compositions. Though the first two identities labeled by Ryan are marked by students’ embracing of writing strategies and structures endorsed by their

teachers, only the third group, reflexive writers, “show evidence of a well-developed sense of self as a writer” (p. 143). The reflexive writers communicate “a command of writing” (Ryan, p. 145) through their mastery of voice, a somewhat contested term in composition theory and pedagogy, as Spandel (2013) argues that while some elements of voice can be taught, “much of voice comes from within (p. 145). It is interesting that the very qualities that often set student writing apart as excellent are those that are most associated with writing in personalized ways. Yet, these are the characteristics of writing that many educators abandon when it comes to pedagogy—standardization does not encourage, nor typically reward, creativity.

Irrespective of genre conventions, there have been studies that seek to examine phenomena beyond applications for the allowable expressions of identity in formal educational contexts. For example, Merchant’s (2005) study analyzes the ways in which students actively engage in identity work as he examines identity through writing as performance. Merchant reviews digital writing exchanges to consider how students construct their identities through computer-mediated communication as part of a series of school projects. Concluding that the opportunities for identity creation and performance offered by digital writing in a school context are invaluable for students, Merchant warns that, “The informal and at times experimental character of this writing should not be a reason to dismiss it” (p. 313), a recommendation that suggests we reevaluate the types of writing sanctioned in formal academic contexts in consideration of the powerful ways composing practices offer our students opportunities for expression. Another example of an in-depth examination of identity as it pertains to writing is found in the work of Durst, whose two-year qualitative study exploring student-teacher interactions in a first-year

college composition program was guided in part by the questions “Who are our students? What do they want? And what should we teach them?” (1999, p. 170). Durst argues for a composition curriculum that better serves students’ needs for practical experience, and while he cautions against promoting satisfaction with the status quo, he suggests that writing teachers will be more effectively able to guide students toward critical perspectives if faculty structure their courses in such a way as to not disparage students for their desires to succeed, even as they are encouraged to critique that same society in which they wish to succeed.

Though not all of these studies reference the seminal work of Ivanič (1998), they all demonstrate a reflection of her theoretical conception of discursal selves, a concept that was further developed with her colleague Burgess in 2010. Ivanič’s (1998) publication investigated the discursal construction of identity through a study that used a collaborative research design to analyze the writing of mature (above the age of 25) first-generation college students. Ivanič’s findings led her to conclude that

academic literacy is not a neutral, unproblematic skill which students simply have to acquire, but a multiple, complex and contested set of social practices which should be given more explicit and critical attention by all members of the academic community. (pp. 110)

This set of social practices calls for fluidity of identity, as Ivanič found that “writing is an act of identity in which writers align themselves with interests...values, beliefs, practices and power relations through their discourse choices” (p. 110). Depending on the rhetorical situation, formal educational contexts require writers to position themselves in different ways as they navigate the discursal choices available to them.

Identity work through composing practices outside of formal educational contexts. All writing is constrained by genre conventions, as well as our senses of what

topics and modes of expression are valued in varying writing contexts. Outside of formal educational contexts, where K-12 contexts frequently design writing instruction in response to the demands of standardized testing, and where college composition tasks continue to adhere to often stringent conventions in terms of formatting requirements and discipline specific expectations, students may find their composing practices to be less constrained. In an exciting age of unprecedeted access to instant audiences, emergent adults are free to try out multiple identities through expressive modes of composition. In a review of studies published between 2000 and 2014 examining “non-school” writing practices, Schultz, Hull and Higgs concluded that “writing flourished everywhere, except in school” (2016, p. 103). These researchers’ interests focused on the non-school writing of K-12 students, but their findings, which stemmed from an analysis of 56 studies—most of them involving adolescents—may very well also apply to emergent adult college students, for the following reason.

Arnett’s (2000) conception of emergent adulthood includes what he calls the dimension of subjectivity, which he establishes by providing research showing most emergent adults still relate to adolescence in some respects. Thus, the “adult” piece of emergent adulthood is a subjective concept, since many emergent adults do not feel that they have reached true adulthood. Since most emergent adults still view themselves as more “adolescent” than “adult,” it is not a stretch to conceive that the themes found in the research on adolescent populations reviewed by Schultz et. al. also apply to emergent adults’ writing activities outside of formal educational contexts.

The two dominant themes underscoring the literature reviewed by Schultz et. al were that students write outside of school in order to 1) create local and global

connections, and 2) to represent selves. Also noteworthy in the authors' literature review is the observation that the bulk of scholarship produced since the turn of the century concerning out-of-school writing examines writing in online spaces. The researchers claim that "writing can facilitate...agentive self-authoring and fluid identity negotiation" (p. 108). Coyne, et. al observe that new forms of media, including social networking sites, "have dramatically increased total media use and changed the way emerging adults communicate during this developmental period" (2013, p. 126). Addressing how these digital communication practices allow for identity work, Coyne et. al explain, "What an individual posts on a SNS [Social Networking Site] makes a statement about who he or she is, and emerging adults might experiment with posting various content, photos, and information as ways to try on possible selves" (p. 131). Williams (2008) agrees, declaring that one of the "more intriguing" aspects of social media is "the way online technologies allow young people to manipulate and play with their identities" (p. 683). A plethora of other researchers have begun exploring how identities are constructed and negotiated online through writing and other representations of self, including Young (2013), Zhao (2014), and Spiliotopoulos and Carey (2005), to name a few.

While digital spaces are clearly ripe with opportunities for young people to engage in identity work through composing practices, so, too, are more traditional modes of writing. Creative genres such as personal essays, narratives, fiction, and poetry, in particular, provide many avenues for self-exploration and expression. Consider the vast array of voices in multicultural literature that proclaim, contest, and explore multiracial identities. In the poem "Cross," for example, Langston Hughes (1923) writes, "My old man died in a fine big house. My ma died in a shack. I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black?" Similarly, Sherman Alexie explores biracial identity challenges in a more contemporary work, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000):

I don't drink alcohol, never have, mostly because I don't want to maintain and confirm any of my ethnic stereotypes, let alone the most prevalent one, but also because my long-lost father, a half-breed, is still missing somewhere in the bottom of a tequila bottle. I had always wondered if he was a drunk because he was Indian or because he was white or because he was both. (pp. 47)

These and many other works from American Literature written by multiracial authors suggest that creative writing may be able to be utilized in empowering ways to explore and voice racial identities while providing a means for speaking out against socio-political stereotypes and racial assumptions. The examples listed previously are by well-known authors throughout literary history, but other recent works including Chiawei O'Hearn's (1998) *Half & Half: Growing Up Biracial & Bicultural* and Garrod, et. al's (2014) *Mixed: Multiracial College Students Tell Their Life Stories* show expressions of identity as manifested through the writing of less-established authors. Garrod et. al's work is particularly relevant to this study, as the personal essays included were all written by college students, showing that writing done outside of course requirements (including personal essays) can be a meaningful way for students to engage in racial identity work.

Having established that composing practices both in and out of formal educational contexts are identity-focused and expressive, I now turn to a select review of literature regarding race and identity. A plethora of theory and research exists regarding both of these expansive topics; therefore, I focus this review only on what is applicable to my proposed study. Finally, I examine scholarship that explores the relationship between race and writing in an effort to establish the context for this study.

Race & Identity

Racial identity. Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) acknowledge that racial identity is an often misunderstood and contested concept. In fact, as I briefly discussed previously, scholars in critical race studies, education, psychology and other fields have argued that race as a biological construct does not exist. Among them are Root (2004), Spencer (2006), and Davis (2009), with Root observing that “all U.S. racial groups represent multiracial populations” (p. 11). Smedley and Smedley definitively summarize,

The consensus among most scholars in fields such as evolutionary biology, anthropology, and other disciplines is that racial distinctions fail on all three counts—that is, they are not genetically discrete, are not reliably measured, and are not scientifically meaningful. (2005, pp. 16)

Nevertheless, even though these authors recognize that the socially constructed concept of race “is based on an imprecise and distorted understanding of human differences,” Smedley and Smedley argue that social policies cannot ignore race because racial labels stereotype people, impacting their social statuses, behaviors, and social rankings (p. 22).

This is the reality in which Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) define racial identities: racial identity is a critical part of both individual and collective identity, a perception that a person shares common heritage with a specific racial group. The authors go on to note that skin color is a labeling tool that allows us to distance ourselves from those we consider different from us. They write, “Racial identity is a surface-level manifestation based on what we look like yet has deep implications in how we are treated” (p. 40).

Identity. Even more complex than the concept of racial identity is the still broader notion of identity itself. Though a full exploration of the literature and theories regarding identity is far beyond the scope of this project, I approach this study with the

understanding that acts of writing are one way in which we “perform” our identities.

According to seminal feminist theorist Judith Butler (1988), “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (p. 527). Mahtani (2002) extends Butler’s ideas to race, arguing that “performances” of race are cultural constructions rather than biological imperatives. Racial realities, then, can also be socially constructed through identity performances, as seen in the work of Mahtani, who studied the complicated enacted performances of “Mixed race” women; and Alim, Lee, & Carris (2010), who examined how meanings of race and ethnicity were created through free-style rap battles. Acts of writing (and other composing practices) also count as performances—the sharing of such writing and other “texts” is akin to “performing” for an audience—and some such performances enact racial identities.

Merchant (2005), a literacy scholar who adopts this view of identity as performative, explains the relationship between literacy and identity as such:

Envision the individual as author or playful agent in the production and performance of identity... acts of authorship are significant in the performance of identity and suggest a view of digital literacy in which identity and agency are key interrelated elements as learners position themselves in the multiple social practices and discourses that surround them. The process of engaging in “new” discursive practices in the classroom (e.g. writing on screen) provides a way of heightening awareness of writing and identity. Written texts and children’s identities as writers can be simultaneously constructed in interaction within the specific social context of writing projects. (pp. 303-304)

Though Merchant works with younger students, his conception of identity as performative is applicable to a higher education context, one in which multiple identities are performed through a variety of composing practices. Since this study is designed to

give voice to multiracial college students, I now explain how I am conceiving multiracial identity.

Multiracial identity. In believing that my children and all people born to parents of different racial backgrounds have the right to select their own unique racial identities, I align myself with Davis' (2009) definition of "multiracial," which she describes as a term that indicates "a person who *self-identifies* as having two or more separate racial heritages; it also includes biracial people" (p. 33, emphasis added). Henceforth, to increase readability, I will refer to participants in this study—as well as biracial and multiracial participants from existing scholarship—as multiracial (as opposed to using the wordier phrase "biracial and/or multiracial"). Per Davis' definition, the term multiracial includes biracial individuals. An exception to my use of this terminology will be made when participants refer to themselves using racial labels of their own choosing (ex., biracial, mixed, Black and White, multicultural, etc.).

In Davis' definition, the "self-identifies" piece is important because Davis, following in the footsteps of Spencer (2006), argues that race as a biological construct does not exist; however, racial categories are maintained by society as a way to empower and privilege some while controlling others. Davis notes that cultural behaviors are often confused for racial behaviors and argues that all Americans are multiethnic to some extent, that "individuals vary as much within *racial groups* as they vary between *racial groups*" (p. 48). Therefore, tracing our family trees back far enough, many of us might fit the term "multiracial" under the second part of Davis' definition, (having two or more separate racial heritages), but the first piece of the definition, *self-identifies*, is equally important, as this indicates that a recognition of two or more racial heritages is valued by

the individual who claims the multiracial identity. Similarly, not all individuals born of parents of differing racial backgrounds will necessarily identify with both races, and therefore, such people may consider themselves monoracial. Thus, self-identification is an aspect of racial identity that I deemed as an essential component of multiraciality. However, in examining my biases, I recognize that because I am in a marriage in a home that values more than one culture, I also tend to think of multiraciality as inclusive of multiple cultures. Recognizing this is not the case for everyone, I opted to conceptualize students' "self-identification" as sufficient if participants felt that they met the requirements for eligibility listed on the poster regarding having parents from two or more distinct racial backgrounds and self-identifying as biracial or multiracial. Thus, several participants did identify more strongly with one racial identity than another/others, but were still afforded an opportunity to participate so long as they identified with their multiraciality to the extent that they considered themselves eligible per the specifications on the flier; this is discussed further in Chapter Three.

Writers of Color: Identity Negotiation, Exploration, & Expression

Since multiracial student writers have rarely been studied in the context of identity as presented through composing practices (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf's (2005) and Laidlow's (1998) practitioner pieces are exceptions), here I widen the scope of the literature reviewed to consider what we do know about identity work as it has been explored through the experiences of other writers of color. Furthermore, since my argument rests upon the notion that all writing inherently involves identity work, I begin by reviewing scholarship that specifically examines racial identity work through composing practices, but I then include in this discussion additional works that speak to

the relationships between writing and race in educational contexts. While not all of the literature here focuses on identity, every included piece demonstrates an important contribution to the study of writing and race. Since I believe all of our compositions offer some insight to our identities, such works examining race and writing provide the context for my research.

Joseph (2004) argues that all of us are “engaged with language in a lifelong project of constructing who we are, and who everyone is that we meet, or whose utterances we simply hear or read” (p. 14). Such an argument focusing on language as a tool for lifelong identity construction supports the notion that identity is fluid and negotiated over time. Negotiations through written language occur frequently, and one way of viewing these navigations is through Burgess & Ivanič’s (2010) framework, which views identity not as fixed and static, but as dynamic and shifting as dependent upon the discursal situation at hand. Using their framework, we can view identities as fluctuating, recognizing that rhetorical choices made by authors shape others’ views of who those authors are. In realizing that written language communicates a version of ourselves to those who will be reading our writing, we (to varying degrees, consciously or unconsciously) choose how to represent ourselves in writing.

An example of how that representation can be racialized is found in Ivanič’s previously mentioned study (1998) of eight participants, two of whom identified as students of color. One of those students, Donna, illustrates the fluidity of identity in the writing sample she provided for analysis in the study. A Black feminist, Donna’s topic selection in itself indicates her awareness of identity work, as she wrote to the following prompt: “CRITICALLY ASSESS THE WAYS IN WHICH BLACK PEOPLE HAVE

REDEFINED THEIR OWN IDENTITY IN LITERATURE AND MASS MEDIA” (p. 314). Ivanič notes that Donna’s essay is “full of discourse” prominent in Black feminist sources as opposed to scholarly resources. In addition to Ivanič’s speculating that Donna most likely consulted political documents rather than traditional scholarship to inform her essay, positioning her “as active on this political issue, rather than as a detached academic observer,” she maintains that Donna also “consciously and intentionally uses the ‘street talk’ expression *telling it like it is* which discoursally constructs her as Black” (p. 315). As a writer, Donna deliberately makes intentional rhetorical choices in order to portray a specific writing identity, creating the identity she feels is most appropriate for her task by selecting from the possibilities for identity portrayal available to her.

Valerie, the only other participant of color in this study, also described intentionally positioning herself as a Black woman in her writing, claiming in an interview, “I cannot just write as an ordinary person...when you read it you’ve got to know that I’m a Black woman” (p. 314). Interestingly, in the data analysis, neither Ivanič, Valerie, nor any other independent reader was able to identify specific aspects of form or content from the essay Valerie submitted for data collection that communicated her desired positionality. However, Valerie often writes in metaphors and imaginative language. A tutor’s suggestion to tone down one of her vivid descriptions is an example of how “good story-telling, jokes and colourful language... [are not] given high priority by the majority of the academic community” (320). Short (2014) has argued that stories are a strength for all learners, pointing out that how we choose to tell stories is a culturally-based decision. Valerie’s linguistic choices, devalued by her tutor in this particular situation, illustrate a situation in which an important aspect of her writing

identity (being a good storyteller) was smothered in the tutor's attempt to help Valerie engage in what was considered more appropriate academic discourse. Valerie's disappointment at this suggestion as communicated in her interview is evidence that academic spaces often allow for limited means of identity negotiation, as only certain writing identities are valued. In an article written at the turn of the century that still carries much weight, Villaneuva (1999) describes a group of graduate students who "no longer wish to be reduced to wearing white masks if they are to succeed in the university... the denial of their being of color affords them nothing but their silencing" (p. 652). Likewise, Trask (1999) identifies universities as institutions that serve to legitimize and reify White, colonizing power. Thus, while identity negotiation in academic spaces occurs for all students as they engage in composing practices, the negotiation of accepted identities for people of color is often an oppressive process, one that requires students to mask or deny aspects of themselves as they seek to write texts that will be valued by the academy.

This identity negotiation through writing choices certainly shapes the texts being written, but writing assignments themselves can also shape acts of identity negotiation. An example of this can be found in Capello's (2006) practitioner piece. Though Capello focuses on the experiences of younger students, her insights certainly may apply to a higher education context. Through portraiture developed after conducting participant-observation, interviews, and document analysis based on writing-workshop experiences in her classroom, Cappello maintains that children's identities are negotiated through their writing just as the writing itself is negotiated by the children's voices. Noting that voice in writing is "inextricably linked to children's social identities," Cappello

concludes that her participants “drew upon their notions of the purposes of writing, the appropriation of various discourses, and the use of writing to privilege [themselves], suggesting a reciprocal relationship between their social identities, voices, and the texts they create” (p. 490). Voice, as Cappello conceives it, is a socially situated and context specific representation of self.

Of particular interest to this literature review is Cappello’s portrait of Alexander, a student of color who used writing to enact both “good boy” and “bad boy” roles. Throughout the writing pieces analyzed in this study, Alexander accomplishes several goals through his rhetorical choices: He composes stories that portray the bad-boy role appropriated from his older brother, who had a distinguished reputation of renowned troublemaker within the school. Additionally, in a somewhat conflicting manner, he accesses the “good boy” role through writing protagonist’s actions that he perceives as pleasing to his teachers. His ability to navigate these two binary identities and leverage them as he deems appropriate shows thoughtful negotiation of rhetorical choices to achieve desired presentations. As students grapple with writing choices that form the voice in their writing, they are exercising fluidity in identity.

School as a context for such negotiation highlights the fluidity of identity. Burgess & Ivanič (2010) argue that

For most students, identities in educational contexts are transitory, mediating identities; hence, the practices in which they engage while attending courses may be for extrinsic purposes, not part of the identities to which they aspire for the rest of their lives. Students may be in an ambivalent relationship with this identity: partially desiring and partially resisting being constructed. (pp. 3)

Thus, identities constructed through writing in school assignments may differ vastly from those explored outside of school. The manifestations of such differing

identities in and out of school show how identity is constantly reified in varying ways for a broad spectrum of purposes. Kirkland (2013) examines this phenomenon in *A Search Past Silence: The Literacy of Young Black Men*, opening up his scholarly work (which he classifies as “story as ethnography” (p. 151)) by describing the confusion of a White female teacher who finds a diary—“an artifact of his literacy life”—belonging to one of her students, Derrick. Though the teacher is confused as to why Derrick “doesn’t write like this in class,” Kirkland explains that the diary “defined a kind of Black maleness present in a world that provided him no true voice” (p. 18). When confronted by the teacher, Kirkland posits that for Derrick, literacy was about “seeing, hearing, and respecting what he had to say” (p. 20). Kirkland praises the out-of-school writing endeavors undertaken by Derrick and his friends, describing Derrick’s poetry as “beautiful and complex, elaborate with imagery and sophistication and language crafted well beyond his age” (p. 55) and the teens’ compositions of rap lyrics as “a practice of discovery/recovery where the young men found themselves and began to understand essential aspects of life, which in their words, motivated the things they wrote about” (p. 30). Through poetry, Derrick establishes his identity as a lover, penning thoughtful, moving poems for his girlfriend. The writing of raps serves a variety of purposes for the teenage boys in Kirkland’s research, including the expression of grief and anger as well as the fulfillment of the desire for community through the sharing of Black adolescent experiences. Here the boys access different identities: Victim, Survivor, Artist, Writer. The ways in which the males in Kirkland’s study portray themselves in writing in and out of school demonstrate how, in the figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of male writers of color, identity changes depending upon the purpose and context

for the writing. Though after reading his diary, Derrick's teacher claimed, "You are a writer," (p. 19), up until that moment, these words of affirmation actually showcase how he had not been seen as a "writer" by his teacher through his lack of engagement or success with school writing assignments. While some writers are able to negotiate how they prefer to position themselves in various writing assignments—fluidly navigating identity—other times, school assignments and contexts for writing may limit students' options for identity exploration and expression, particularly if the student is a student of color.

Writing activities may be a way to grapple with questions surrounding race, but just as often, such questions may not be able to be answered or even asked. In fact, in formal educational spaces, the kinds of writing identities academic assignments promote do not necessarily afford students the opportunity to explore racial (or other significant) aspects of identity. Bickerstaff, for example, concluded that though the participants in her study of out-of-school adolescents returning to a school setting claimed "robust literate identities" (2012, p. 63) in their personal lives, the isolated nature of academic literacy expected in the scholarly program in which they were enrolled led them to experience a disconnect between the literacies they skillfully engaged in outside of school and the kinds of writing tasks they were expected to do within the curriculum. Similarly, after gathering data in her kindergarten classroom to examine identity construction through writing, Laidlaw (1998) concludes that the classroom is a complicated context in which complex possibilities of personal and social identities are explored. Interestingly, Laidlaw's argument regarding these possibilities uses the telling phrase "in spite of," as she observes that possibilities for self emergence in writing occur *in spite of* (not

“because of” or “due to”) complicated experiences in school. Of particular relevance to the question of how multiracial students negotiate identity through writing is Laidlaw’s portrait of Jennifer, a student of color in her classroom. Concerning Jennifer, Laidlaw writes that she

in joining a desired peer group and in carefully constructing her stories to be similar to theirs, communicates some awareness of “who she is”... and who she believes she must become in order to gain acceptance. Jennifer’s stories provide evidence of the careful negotiation of her classroom identity. As the teacher, however, I may have unintentionally supported a particular definition of her identity in the classroom, and perhaps even facilitated a sort of “silencing,” by failing to investigate, to probe more deeply into the writing and social behavior of that particular group of children. (pp. 130)

Laidlaw’s reflections are intriguing, as she worries that Jennifer’s writings seek the approval of a particular clique of peers. In presenting her concerns, she writes the following, inviting the readers to confront possible notions of colorblind discourse:

I have left out some details which may (or may not) change one’s interpretation of this particular story... I have included what seem to be the “necessary details.” But now I will complicate things a little. What if I were to tell you that Jennifer is a child of mixed heritage, a minority child, and her family lives in modest circumstances—and the girls she wishes to emulate are upper-middle-class White girls? What if I said that Jennifer generally seems embarrassed to share any details of her own cultural background or to reveal her serious health condition? Or if I told you that she shows much insight about social situations in the classroom, and often makes precise comments which describe the classroom context and the relationships therein, though she never discusses herself in making these comments? (pp. 128)

Laidlow structures her analysis as to invite questions from readers, as she herself frames her argument in a series of “what ifs,” freely admitting that interpretation of the portrayal might vary if she includes certain details. However, chief among the questions I would ask is: How much is it reasonable to expect a student to engage in this type of identity work through writing at the kindergarten level? The questions Laidlaw poses are

intriguing, but would perhaps carry much more weight in a secondary or post-secondary context.

Several other scholars in education, including Buell (2012), Muhammad (2012), and Paris (2012) have also found the composing practices of writers of color to be constrained. In a case study, Buell found that her participant Lucinda experienced a diminishing of her racial identity as she engaged in academic writing. Lucinda opted to mute her Latina identity as she developed a written statement for admission into the undergraduate education department at a large university. Though an earlier draft of her application contained a much more explicit and personalized expression of her Latina positioning, Lucinda eventually revised her personal statement in accordance with advice she received from a writing center tutor. Buell writes, “Lucinda saw her career goal of becoming an educator of Latino youth as inextricably tied to her own identity as a Latina,” (p. 8). Nevertheless, Lucinda ultimately rewrote her statement to be more moderate, affirming the “colorblind discourse” the tutor seems to have endorsed. Buell describes Lucinda’s textual negotiation:

Lucinda shifted away from representing the deep ethnic connection of her goals and moved toward a more superficial representation because she understood a writing center tutor to say that her stance on Latino/a educational concerns was too negative and possibly too militant to be acceptable to reviewers in the College of Education. (pp. 9)

It is especially ironic that Lucinda felt the need to present a more colorblind version of herself through her academic discourse in this space of authoring, as she reported that posters and promotional materials published by the education department seemed to communicate a valuing of diversity. Likewise, titles of courses within the program and questions on the application itself gave Lucinda the impression that her

experiences as a student of color would be valued within this academic community, yet the conference with the tutor led her to decide “that writing from a strongly Latina perspective would diminish her chances of acceptance into a mainstream program” (p. 9). Buell believes this illustrates a contradiction of values as “the desire for increased minority numbers was clear but a larger institutional openness to minority perspectives was not” (p. 9). The implications from this case study show how entire academic communities can prefer colorblind discourse, as Lucinda’s experience shows identity negotiation through writing within an application process to be a restrictive endeavor.

Buell’s findings depict particular writing tasks undertaken within academic institutions as constrained activities; Lucinda found that an explicit portrayal of her identity as a woman of color was not valued in this context. Such a finding echoes the view of education articulated by Leonardo, who argues that education is one of a number of social systems that

treat people of color as tabula rasa to be filled with white intentions and civilized ways. It is a veritable and verifiable form of what Freire (1993) once called “banking education” where knowledge is deposited into the account known as minority minds, this time with the added injury of civilizing them. (2015, pp. 90).

The truth of this conception of American education can be demonstrated through the next works to be discussed, which also show that academic spaces restrict allowable writing identities to those that reinforce colorblind narratives in ways that do not challenge White supremacist values.

Muhammad voiced concerns that echo those of Laidlaw (1998) and Bickerstaff (2012) when she investigated the research question “How did the experiences in a socially collaborative space (a summer writing institute) help a black adolescent girl make meaning of her identities, as compared to her classroom experiences?” (2012, p.

204). Through semi-structured interviewing and document analysis protocols in a single-case study, Muhammad also drew conclusions that showed the classroom is often a restricted space that limits expression of writers of color. Muhammad found that her participant, Iris, experienced writing in the classroom in ways that were characterized by her perceived lack of validation and pressure to mask her identity. Data from the research showed that Iris felt that “Her experiences within English language arts classrooms in schools did not affirm her identities...” and that she did not have ample “opportunities in school to write about painful and real experiences that happened to black women historically, to black girls presently, or to her personally because of teachers requesting that she censor her language and the description of these experiences” (p. 209). Based on these findings, Muhammad issues a call for action for secondary educators, recommending that teachers create safe spaces for Black adolescent girls to express themselves in writing without feeling the need to mask their identities.

Paris (2012) makes a similar call as he reflects upon the findings from one of his cases in his social literacy case study research—noting that a Mexican American high school student, Pedro, engaged in meaningful protest literacy practices outside of school, but remained uninterested in and inattentive to the kinds of reading and writing he was asked to do in school. Paris notes that “It is not enough to include literature like Langston Hughes or Lorraine Hansberry that explores the struggle for human rights for communities of color in the United States; we must connect the struggles in literature and other classroom content to continuing struggles” (p. 8-9). Paris suggests we can do this by examining “identity texts,” which he explains are “youth space” (p. 1) texts featuring inscribed ethnic and other identities depicted through clothing, accessories, texting, social

media posting, and many other forms of non-traditional texts. Paris concludes that marginalized youth do use writing and other literacy practices to empower themselves and affect change in the world around them; thus, he challenges teachers to implement culturally sustaining literacy practices into classroom spaces.

Thus far, we have seen how formal educational contexts may constrain the writing identities of students of color. For those students who also identify as multiracial, though, navigating discoursal selves as they attempt to position themselves in writing may be an even more complex endeavor. These writers are likely to be located in classrooms where the cultural norm is to identify as monoracial, and when they write in contexts outside of school, they may still face racial assumptions which may be incorrect or only partially true. Burgess and Ivanič (2010) recognize the potential difficulty for writers in negotiating identity as they anticipate how their readers will perceive them:

There may be substantial differences between a writer's allegiances and the sense of identity inherent in her autobiographical self and her assessment of how she ought to portray herself on the basis of her anticipation of what the reader(s) expect of her. The tensions and contradictions set up by these differences can be a considerable obstacle for someone trying to write, especially because they operate for the most part below the level of consciousness and so may not be recognized as the source of difficulty. (pp. 248)

Multiracial students are writing in and out of classrooms in a country where race is showcased frequently in news stories related to police brutality, protests, and social unrest. Therefore, their "allegiances" and "senses of identity," (to use Burgess and Ivanič's terms) may be conflicting—particularly if classmates tend to make assumptions about these students' racial identities for them, as was documented in one instance by Dutro et. al (2005), who were conducting classroom research on literacy activities, but ended up exploring race when the legitimacy of students' multiracial identities were

questioned. Renn (2000) has studied multiracial students' perceptions of their peers' evaluation of their chosen racial identities on college campuses, and Davis (2009) and Knaus (2006) have also compiled narratives written or told by multiracial individuals that reflect upon assumptions imposed upon participants by monoracial others.

In an ideal world, writing assignments in our courses could give these marginalized students space to claim their unique identities through writing and the sharing of writing. However, for many students of color, the literature indicates that the "voices" of students are often molded into those which are socially allowable and encouraged within the conformity of academic spaces. Many educators dismiss this notion, protesting that the academic writing we expect of students should be objective and, in a sense, voiceless—many formal writing assignments discourage even the use of a personal pronoun—but Williams (2006) argues against this view, pointing out that "identity is *always* present in writing. The idea that any writing can be disconnected from identity is absurd" (p. 712). Whether emergent adults are doing so in or outside of formal educational contexts—through digital or traditional means—writing can provide profound opportunities for young men and women to explore, express, and negotiate identities. Turning to Baez's (2000) description of racism as local helps us understand the localized ways in which people of color experience and resist racism in everyday activities such as composing practices. Baez suggests that racism "might permeate social relations and the minute details of everyday life (thus, it is 'local') and is enforced by the power of the normalizing effects of institutions, practices, and relations" (p. 329). Literature does show, however, ways that writing and other composing practices can

function as a means for positively expressing racialized identities and resisting racism in localized composing contexts.

When teachers, mentors, peers, or the individual writers themselves are able to create safe spaces for people of color to express themselves through writing, powerful and transformative identity negotiation can occur (Muhammad, 2012, 2015; Kirkland, 2013; Tatum, 2015; Beach et. al., 2015; Paris, 2010, 2012; Gasman et. al, 2004). This kind of writing may occur in formal schooling contexts, but it also may be (and is, perhaps, much more likely to be) accessed outside of formal educational spaces. Paris (2012), Kirkland (2012), and Muhammad (2012), whose works were discussed earlier, found that in spite of classroom writing activities and settings stifling the racial identities of students of color, participants in their research had rich literacy lives outside of school, using writing as a means to express and explore various aspects of identity. Paris's (2010) earlier work found that in a multiethnic high school, students frequently engaged in creating "identity texts" which increased the voice and power of culturally and linguistically marginalized groups—such composing practices, which valued aspects of minority group identity that were not validated in formal educational spaces, included texts that were inscribed on clothing and accessories, sent via electronic media (such as through text messages), and performed orally, such as raps. Paris's contributions illustrate how the composing of identity texts can vary in terms of modes, complexity, and intended audiences.

In one example from Kirkland's ethnography, Kirkland describes the cathartic effects of writing for a young Black male who had recently endured a beating at the hands of law enforcement: "That day, Shawn found strength in writing, especially in

writing the rap with Derrick. It was his first voiced response to his beating, his first figuration of meaning around an event that left him initially at a loss for words” (p. 31).

In Kirkland’s re-storying of this moment in his participants’ lives, Shawn acknowledges the therapeutic effect of engaging in collaborative writing with Derrick. Shawn and Derrick’s written words give voice to a struggle that shapes, even defines, who they are; in writing themselves into their raps, they process hurt and hardship, injustice and violence.

Muhammad (2012) also found writing to be a powerful means of identity negotiation. She argues in her case study of Iris that the writing Iris completed through a five-week writing institute designed for Black adolescent females shows evidence of identity exploration and reflection. Muhammad’s analysis of Iris’ writing reveals expressed identities of ethnicity and physicality as well as gender, kinship, and resiliency. Furthermore, Muhammad equates writing with emancipation and liberation. In a subsequent study similar in terms of methodology and topic, the same author (2015) turned to case study once again to analyze the representations of self in the writing of eight Black adolescent girls in a four-week long summer literacy collaborative. This time, Muhammad found that her participants wrote through six different representations of identity: community, cultural (including both gender and ethnic), individual, intellectual, and, finally, sexual. Muhammad claims that the writings of her participants ranged across platforms similar to those historically addressed by other African-American women writers, and notes that, “Writing became a hybrid medium to construct ideals of self amid dominant discourses. With each day of the collaborative, I learned more about the girls through their writings and interactions” (p. 243). Muhammad

learned much about her participants' identities through their writing, concluding that, "researchers and educators must not get trapped in singular profiles of Black girlhood as seen publically in media, in literature, and within society. This was something that the girls resisted and wrote against" (p. 243). The writers also learned about themselves, as Muhammad observed her participants using writing as a way to "make sense of their own lives" by openly writing about themselves; she charges writing instructors with the imperative of providing students with spaces in which they can "connect with, negotiate, and challenge dominant narratives about their identities" (p. 244).

This implication from Muhammad's research aligns well with Beach et. al's (2015) work, which uses case studies from two different settings (an urban high school in the Bay area and a suburban one in Minnesota) to support an identity-focused approach to ELA teaching. These authors describe five overlapping identity practices they consider most relevant for ELA teachers: 1) Adopting alternative perspectives, 2) Making connections across people and texts, 3) Negotiating identities across different social worlds, 4) Engaging in critical analysis of texts and the world, and 5) Reflecting on identity development over time. These five identity practices should, the authors argue, frame instruction in order to foster students' identity development. They claim that such a teaching approach "can open up new possibilities for understanding and critiquing language, narrative, discourse, and text as they position and shape our possibilities" (p. 6). Much of Beach et. al's work is relevant to the notion of writing as a powerful means of identity negotiation, but what they have to say about writer identity is especially noteworthy:

Writing is... a representation of the self... Writing can also serve as a mediating or buffering source, allowing students to adopt identities they may not have spaces

to “try on” elsewhere. Asking students to write rap lyrics, poems, noir thriller short stories, and theatrical plays provides opportunities for students to make connections across differences by attempting various writer identities. (pp. 102-103)

Using data from the authors’ own case studies as well as examples from other published research, Beach et. al. identify creating written narratives, writing across genres, writing about emotions, and writing about perceptions of self and others as powerful and potentially transformative writing activities that can assist students in identity negotiation.

Employing a mode of writing they call “raw writing,” Tatum & Gue (2010) determined that their participants—Black adolescent males involved in a literacy collaborative that inspired Muhammad’s work—“experienced a new kind of power through writing as they moved toward a stronger sense of self” (p. 92). Though their work predates Beach et. al.’s, and, once again, occurs in a recreational context, Tatum & Gue’s pedagogical practices complement those advocated for several years later by Beach and colleagues. Arguing for the positive transformative nature of writing, Tatum & Gue maintain that the adolescents who engaged in the community of writers they studied in their investigation of the sociocultural benefits of writing and the writing environment for Black adolescent males “used their pens in all their ‘rawness’ as tools of exploration for the benefit of others and themselves” (p. 92). To enable students to write unapologetically, we must strive to create space for all students to do so, and we must be aware of their efforts to engage in these practices outside of classroom contexts. The literature suggests that students of color, including multiracial students, may benefit dramatically from our efforts to both recognize their out-of-school literacy practices and

find ways to engage students in identity work that expressly acknowledge racialized selves through writing in academic settings.

Guerra (2016) agrees, maintaining that “we are no longer in a position to argue that the best we can do is to inculcate our students with the predispositions they need to make a successful transition from their home discourses to academic discourses” (p. x). He argues instead for an emerging perspective known as *writing across difference*, and provides a framework for valuing students’ full repertoires of cultural, linguistic, and semiotic resources. For historically underserved students, Guerra recommends connecting the classroom and the campus to students’ multiple communities of belonging. Though their work preceded Guerra’s, Gasman et. al’s (2004) study showed just how empowering writing can be for students of color when it comes to participating in such activities: Gasman and her colleague, Gerstle-Pepin, engaged in email journaling with three Black doctoral students, inviting them to voice concerns and share experiences that the three participants typically described as needing to mask in the contexts of classroom interactions and coursework.

Other important work defines the way the literacy field considers the experiences of students of color. Chief among the contributions is the debate between Gee and Delpit. Gee (1999) argues that different social identities can be in conflict with each other, and he gives the example of how the common practice of writing essays creates a major cultural conflict for a Native American group studied by Scollon and Scollon (1981), noting that this group viewed the act of writing an essay as a self-display appropriate only for a person in an authoritative position to enact. Gee goes on to argue that our discourses—our language in use—along with many non-linguistic practices and

other aspects of our identities— demonstrate membership in Discourses: “socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting” (1999, p. 17). Gee argues that membership to a Discourse cannot be explicitly taught, but rather, is achieved through early socialization or later apprenticeship. For many students of color, they experience identity clashes as their home Discourses differ from the dominant White Discourse that students are expected to master if they have any hope of being successful in school.

Delpit (1995) agrees with elements of this argument found in an earlier publication by Gee, noting that identity clash is inevitable for many students of color. However, she writes that “Gee’s argument suggests a dangerous kind of determinism as flagrant as that espoused by the geneticists: instead of being locked into ‘your place’ by your genes, you are now locked hopelessly into a lower-class status by your discourse” (p. 154). She goes on to argue that attempting to acquire the dominant Discourse expected in school need not equate with a devaluing of the home Discourses of students of color. Delpit maintains that teachers must not deemphasize the superficial, surface-level characteristics of grammar and style that middle- and upper-class White students have acquired through increased exposure to dominant ideologies. To do so, even if educators are doing so in an effort to value students’ home Discourses, is to provide a disservice to students of color.

Other seminal works that lay the groundwork for this study include Dyson and Genishi’s (1994) *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*, many scholarly works by hooks, including *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and several books by Paley that uncover racism and exclusion in early childhood education, such as

Kwaanza and Me: A Teacher's Story (1995). Dyson and Genishi argue that teachers should turn to the power of stories “for bringing children and their diverse experiences into the classroom and for forging new connections” (p. 6). One such chapter included in their edited volume advocates for capitalizing on the strengths of Black students’ cultural discourses: Smitherman (1994) and her research team analyzed 867 NAEP essays for “blackness” and found that students who wrote in “black expressive discourse style” scored higher than those who did not. Similarly, hooks (1994) notes that in order to effectively teach diverse students, she must learn “cultural codes” (p. 41) and she and her students must value all individual voices within the classroom. Paley (1995) also views educational contexts as spaces in which all voices must be valued, writing, “conflict cannot be avoided. A child is more than the sum of a particular culture, and we are limited in our ability to empathize with each other’s passions,” but “the individual family has the right to see itself reflected in the school culture” (p. 131). All of these scholars agree that students of color benefit from seeing themselves in the curriculum in formal educational settings.

Chao and Mantero (2014) and Heath (1983, 1990) have also authored studies exploring race and literacy; Heath’s ethnographies are especially well known. Her seminal 1983 text illustrated the disjunction between the in-school and out-of-school literacy practices of the children of Trackton, a rural Black community. A more recent example of an ethnography that presented similar findings of a disconnect between the values of in- and out-of-school literacies can be found in the work of Godina (2004), whose study resulted in her claim that the literacy practices of her ten participants—all from Mexican backgrounds—were not valued in their high school setting. Rather, the

students were mostly tracked in lower-level academic classes, in spite of the sophisticated linguistic abilities they demonstrated, such as serving as translators for family members.

Other relevant ethnographies in the field were summarized by Heath (2004) who wrote a chapter for a handbook of multicultural education research that reviewed ethnographies exploring diverse racial identities. In this work, she includes a summary of her own ethnography of Trackton, two more of her own studies, and two studies conducted by other ethnographers. Ethnographies discussed include Heath's depiction of a community of ethnically diverse street youth, her work with colleagues examining a community organization in a high-crime urban center, Yamashita's ethnography of a displaced Japanese-American fishing community, and Zentella's of a New York City Puerto Rican barrio. Heath explains that "the ethnographic cases here reflect structural and behavioral features of communities" which illustrate that "many of today's young do not see their community or their identity as that of a single ethnic group, place, or family" (2004, p. 160). She concludes that the new projected majority—a majority of minority people groups—will be successful only if schools meet the needs of diverse communities.

Failure of schools to recognize the strengths of students and families from diverse backgrounds has been repeatedly demonstrated throughout the literature, as well. Compton-Lilly's (2007) case study, for example, explores the experiences of two Puerto Rican families, concluding that the reading capital possessed by the children and families in her study was often dismissed, suppressed, or devalued. Similarly, Tatum (2013) also used case study to examine capital. He designed a ten-month, qualitative case study in which he also explored cultural capital. He hoped to identify texts that would equip his participant, a 16-year-old Black male, Quincy, with "capital to become resilient amid

some of his negative environmental conditions” (p. 623). Identifying emergent themes as perceived support, meaningful engagement with texts, and ability to self-organize while reading, Tatum presents a model for literacy instruction that he designed to be reflective of the literacy needs of Black adolescent males.

Tatum’s case focuses on the power of literacy at work as he illustrates how selecting meaningful texts for his participant enables him to increase his engagement and success. The texts Black males generally encounter, Tatum argues, are disabling—they reinforce struggling readers’ perceptions that they are struggling. Here, though, Tatum shows how Quincy comes to an understanding that “texts could help him shape a positive life trajectory” (p. 632). When students read and write about topics that matter to them, the results can literally be life changing.

Thus, the literature shows that writing has a powerful potential to serve as a mediating agent in identity negotiation for students of color; unfortunately, research also shows that academic writing assignments often constrain identity, allowing only certain discoursally accepted representations of self to be offered through students’ texts. This study seeks to add to the literature in an effort to examine the ways that multiracial college student writers engage in identity work through their routine writing practices, both within and beyond formal educational contexts. While previous work has established writing as both transformative and limiting when it comes to the ways writers of color position racialized selves within their texts, no study to date that I am aware of has focused on how this plays out with multiracial emergent adult college students; thus, I will attempt to add these voices to the scholarship via the storying of multiple case studies.

Why Emergent Adults?

Students of all ages engage in identity work in a variety of composing practices; emergent adulthood is no exception. Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008) found that emergent adult college students often use the internet to establish and maintain relationships through their composing practices on social networking sites and through instant messaging. Coyne et. al (2013) also examined emergent adult behavior on social networking sites in a review of emergent adults' media usage, arguing that the ways this population chooses to represent themselves online reflect ongoing identity exploration, development, and expression. In a study of 124 blog entries that also included entries authored by adolescent bloggers, Mazur and Kozarian (2010) found that the blogging practices of emergent adults reflect careful consideration of self-presentation. Yet another study similarly revealed emergent adults' composing practices in online spaces to be reflective of developing identities, as Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) examined the ways 92 college students used Facebook. Their participants indicated important representations of their identities through their posting of photos as well as preferences regarding music, movies, and books. Posting information more classically associated with identity, such as religious and political views, was also observed, but these markers of identity were secondary to participants' media preferences. Thus, research continues to show that identity development during emergent adulthood is particularly significant during this time period of life; this is the first reason I selected emergent adulthood age status as criteria for participant eligibility.

On a practical note, emergent adults comprise the majority of the student populations enrolled in my research settings. The three institutions where this research

took place all serve both traditional college students as well as older students; the community college site caters to a slightly older population (with the average enrolled student being 25) and also allows high school students to take credit courses through dual enrollment classes. By limiting this study to the experiences of emergent adults, I placed age parameters around participants in order to more easily examine patterns in students' experiences. Root (2004) has argued that multiracial identity experiences among differing generations are radically dissimilar due to shifting perceptions of multiraciality over time. Recognizing the logic she offers, I wished to focus on the experiences of one specific age group.

Arnett (2000) argues that during the period known as emerging adulthood (roughly conceived of as the time period that occurs between ages 18-25), young people tend to experiment with decisions related to their identities, gradually solidifying who they believe they are and how they want to be perceived by the world through a series of decisions that began in adolescence. During emergent adulthood, those identity choices are often revisited and refined. For many multiracial students, these choices about long-term identity include decisions about their racial identities (Renn, 1998, 2000, 2008; Root, 2004; Liebler, et. al, 2017; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Thus, emergent adulthood is a valuable time during which to examine multiracial college students' identity work through their composing practices.

CHAPTER III

In Search of Multiracial Expressions of Identity: Methods

“A strong sense of self is created from the moment we are born through our culture and ethnic backgrounds. My father is Korean and black and my mother is Guamanian, ever since I was a kid I never truly knew where I fit in.” –Leila

For this study, I designed a qualitative multiple case study to allow my participants—multiracial emergent adult college students from three different research sites—to dialogue with me about how they interpreted their own identity work in and outside of classrooms. Rather than relying solely on my own analytic ability to decipher interpretations of identity manifested in participant texts, I invited participants to discuss their intentions in composing discursal selves (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010) within writing samples of their choice, using interview questions written in accessible language to guide our discussions. A written reflection activity also scaffolded participants’ understandings of their own identity work while providing me further insight into participants’ beliefs about their identities in relation to their literacy practices.

Case study research has been well-established within the field of literacy, with exemplars including Compton-Lilly’s (2009) study of reading capital in two Puerto Rican families and Genishi and Dyson’s (2008) work with diverse children learners. Barone (2011) advises that case study research is appropriate for research that seeks to explore research questions beginning with *how*; she also maintains that case studies can be utilized for description, explanation, and exploration. Furthermore, she posits that if the researcher adapts a critical stance, findings can be used to affect change.

I took care to align my research design with all of Barone’s criteria: I sought to describe, explore, and attempt to explain *how* multiracial emergent adult college students

described their choices to engage (or not engage) in identity work through composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts. In doing so, I employed a critical lens, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as “a framework for understanding the silenced voices of multiracial people” (Knaus, 2006, p. 13). In using a CRT framework, I sought to question and counter not only dominant White narratives that underscore everyday societal operations (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Marx, 2008; Sleeter & Deglado Bernal, 2004), but also, those that presume monoraciality. In the premier issue of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas advocate for “an interrogation of monoracial norms,” asserting that the main purpose of such an approach is to “question the external ascription of monoracial categories of identification as the norm against which all other forms of identification are deemed unacceptable” (2014, p. 14). This framework, then, situates my study, as I seek to give voice to multiracial experiences that remain marginalized and unconsidered in educational contexts.

Overview of Research Design

I adopted a multiple case study design (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010), choosing to examine multiple cases because I hoped that, taken together, they would provide a snapshot of the complex and varied ways multiracial identities are present in emergent adult compositions across contexts. I recruited nine students (seven females and two males) from three different research settings in the same geographic area in the Mid-Atlantic: An open-admissions community college, a four-year, public PWI, and an HBU. I expected that each case would, on its own, offer valuable insights into the literacy practices of that individual, but I also believed that as a collective, the cases would further benefit the scholarly community will benefit even further through an examination

of both the commonalities existing within these young people's experiences and in the diversity that I suspected would surface amongst the different cases. Multiracialism is multifaceted. Even in the same interracial families, siblings often proclaim different racial identities (Root, 2004). Thus, this research design was not intended to produce generalizable findings; rather, its value is in the critical examination I used to increase our understanding of 1) the vastly complex and very different ways that multiracial college students experience identity work through composing practices, and 2) the ways that multiracial college students' identities are shaped, restrained, contested, expressed and/or explored within their literacy practices.

The overarching inquiry guiding this study asked, "How do multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts?" The following four sub-questions, all related to the main question, provided further direction in examining identity work through composing practices of multiracial emergent adult college students:

- 1) How do multiracial emergent adult college students describe their identities as they experience them in their composing practices?
- 2) How do texts composed in and out of formal educational contexts authored by multiracial emergent adult college students communicate authors' racial and other identities to their intended audiences?
- 3) What role does campus context play in the ways that multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices at three different contexts: An open-admissions community college, a

Historically Black University, and a more selective, Predominantly White Institution within the same geographic region?

- 4) In what ways do various literacy contexts privilege or deny the expression of racialized identities for multiracial emergent adult college students?

I endeavored to collect the following data sources from each of the nine participants: two semi-structured interviews, eight texts composed and selected by participants (written in and outside of formal educational contexts), and a written identity reflection activity which prompted students to consider the ways in which they were engaging in identity work through their composing practices. All participants completed the first interview, and all but one completed the second interview. Each participant provided multiple writing samples for us to discuss and for me to analyze; most provided the eight that I requested of them. Seven of the nine participants completed the identity reflection activity. Throughout the data collection period, I wrote analytic and reflective memos.

Interview and written data was analyzed through first and second cycle coding, using holistic and CRT coding methods. I then used writing-as-method (Richardson, 2003; Colyar, 2009; Pelias, 2011) framed by a CRT lens in order to determine and clarify emergent findings, writing up a profile for each case and then continuing my use of writing-as-method to make connections across cases in an ongoing, exploratory memo. Member checking was completed as I shared with each participant the description I wrote of him or her (included in this chapter) as well as the case profile I wrote describing each participant as I interpreted data unique to that individual as answering the research questions framed by my CRT lens. No participant objected to any of my overall

understandings throughout the member checking process, though two students did offer clarifications pertaining to writing samples or my observations; I incorporated their feedback into my revisions.

Theoretical Framework

I share Knaus' (2006) view of CRT as "a framework for understanding the silenced voices of multiracial people" (p. 13). Knaus argues that despite scholarship which documents resistance to White-dominated institutions including schooling, K-12 education "has chosen instead to perpetuate false U.S. narratives of liberty and equality for all, rather than liberty and equality amongst wealthy elite landowning colonizing white immigrants from Western Europe" (p. 24). I agree with Knaus that Eurocentric schooling privileges certain White students while denying the values and languages of many students of color, recognizing that school is one such institution "where racism is reinforced, taught, and ultimately fostered through policies, practices, and what is ultimately considered knowledge" (Knaus, p. 40). Knaus also posits that most U.S. college students are socialized in such a way as to not dwell on racial inequities, subscribing instead to narratives of equity and democratic values. Concerning multiracial students,

The impact of this socialization on students of color, and in particular multiracial students, is dramatic, for at the heart, such a focus denies students of color and multiracial students their very identities and experiences. In particular, multiracial students are socialized to not think about race, even when everything in their experiences tells them, indeed demands, that they respond to others thinking about their presumed race. (Knaus, pp. 65)

Negotiation of racial identity is a core component of many multiracial students' identities (Root, 2004), one which, as illustrated by the above quote, remains pivotal and ongoing

in the lives of many multiracial individuals because of the assumptions of others. Using CRT as a lens to guide this study, I examined each case. In my examination, I sought to find examples in participants' writings and discussions of those writings that served as counterstories disrupting monoracial assumptions held by instructors, peers, and others.

Research Setting

I invited student participation from three campuses across two counties in the same mid-Atlantic state. Here the three institutions are discussed in the order that the first participant from each setting contacted me: An open-admissions community college, a four-year, public PWI, and a four-year, public HBU.

Somerco Community College¹ is an associate's degree-granting institution that offers both credit and certificate programs as well as continuing education and workforce development courses. As of Fall 2016, 4,277 students were enrolled in credit courses, and 6,156 were registered for non-credit classes. At the time of data collection, 65% of credit program students were female, the average age was 25, and 36% of students were non-White. The continuing education department was made up of more males (51%) than females, and the average student was older (36 years). The breakdown of White and non-White students was similar to that of the credit program, though, with 39 percent of students identifying as non-White.

Located about fifteen minutes from Somerco is Kensington University. Many Somerco students end up transferring to Kensington, a mid-sized university that offers 43 undergraduate and 15 graduate programs. As of Fall 2016, 89.9% of the 8,748 students enrolled were undergraduate students: 58.6% were women, and 73.1% were White

¹ Names of all research sites are pseudonyms.

American citizens. 3.2% of KU's student body were classified as belonging to two or more races (approximately 280 students). The age of the average student at the time of data collection was 22, and the average SAT score for newly admitted students was 1722, which is 266 points higher than that of the average of all college freshman throughout the state in which Kensington is located.

Another nearby university to which Somerco students frequently transfer is the University of Bay South, or UBS, the only HBU in this region of the state. The most recent information on UBS's website listed student enrollment for 2015 as being 4,467, 84% of whom were undergraduates. The percentage of students at UBS who identify as belonging to more than one race was much higher than Kensington and Somerco's, according to the publicly available information at the time: 454 multiracial students comprised approximately 11% of the student population. Interestingly, even at an HBU, this number remained lower than the number of White students enrolled, who made up just over 13% of the population.

Participants

Purposive sampling (Knaus, 2006; Stake, 2005) was used in order to recruit participants who met the following requirements: 1) Currently enrolled student status at one of the three participating campuses. Registration in at least one course that required formal writing assignments. 2) Age that indicates emergent adulthood status—over 18 to mid-twenties (Arnett, 2000). 3) Multiracial identity—parents from two or more racially distinct backgrounds *as well as* participants' self-identification in terms of claiming a biracial or multiracial identity. Regarding self-identification, I followed the advice of DeFeo (2014), and opted not to deny participation to anyone based on their

varying definitions of self-identification. Thus, the significance of multiraciality in participants' lives ranged dramatically. For some participants, their multiraciality was the defining element of their racial identities. Others identified as multiracial to the extent that they felt they met my selection requirements, but they frequently identified with one dominant racial identity. I chose to include all participants, even those who did not exclusively identify as multiracial, because according to DeFeo, challenging potential participants' identities through the deselection process can lead to feelings of rejection and disappointment, particularly in studies that focus on identity. Rather than create additional categorical hurdles for students who may already experience conflicted racial identities, I honored their desires to be involved in the study, deciding that if students claimed that they met the requirements on the flier listed above next to criterion 3), they had a right to participate, even if they typically identified as monoracial in other contexts.

The purpose of my recruiting multiracial college students has been clearly indicated through the problem of practice I have established, but it may be beneficial to further elaborate on why I am choosing to focus on emergent adults within this population. Using emergent adulthood as criteria for participation increased my ability to discern patterns across cases with participants; all three of the institutions where I invited participation serve older students as well as traditionally-aged college students; however, research (Root, 2004) shows that identity experiences of multiracial people may differ vastly across generations, as the legalization of interracial marriage has led to an explosion of growth in the multiracial population, with younger people experiencing the world very differently than those who were born even a decade earlier. Thus, emergent adulthood status allowed me the flexibility to recruit beyond the age of the typical college

student. Placing a boundary on the upper age limit still ensured participants would be relatively close enough in age for me to analyze themes.

Selection criteria also indicated that potential participants must be enrolled in at least one course that contained a formal writing component. Students were considered to be enrolled in an appropriate course if at least one of their classes required that they submit four or more compositions for a grade. The required compositions did not need to be traditional texts, though traditional written texts were suitable and welcome. Essays, PowerPoint presentations, multimedia projects, online discussion posts, creative writing pieces, journaling activities, or any other “text”—defined broadly by Pahl and Rowsell (2012) as “an articulation of a discourse” (p. xxi)—which the student could provide a physical or digital copy of, and for which the student received (or would receive) a grade enabled students to participate in this study. This broad conception of the formal writing component allowed participation from a variety of disciplines and course levels while ensuring that students would be able to discuss the minimum number of compositions from formal educational contexts in their interviews.

I recruited nine participants, three from each campus. I arrived at this number through careful consideration: I did not want the sample to be too large, as the value of the case-studies’ depth per participant would have been sacrificed if I found myself overwhelmed with data from too many cases within the compressed time frame I intended to complete this study. Some case studies in the field include even fewer participants (Tatum, 2013; Muhammad, 2012; Buell, 2012), but I sought at least nine to ensure that if any participants withdrew from the study, I would still have multiple cases to examine. As it turned out, no participant withdrew, although one did not finish the

entire data collection process. Still, the nine participants supplied me with an abundance of rich data.

Participants were recruited via fliers, email, advertising of the study through classes, and snowball sampling. Appendix A shows the flier that was used to recruit participants; this flier was displayed at Somerco Community College and Kensington University. Appendix B shows the text of the recruitment email that was sent to the student bodies of all institutions. At Somerco, this email was sent directly to all students. At Kensington and UBS, the email was included as an announcement in a list of campus notices sent via daily email.

I also advertised my study in relevant courses in person at Somerco, briefly discussing the opportunity in several classes, and asking a professional contact to do the same. At UBS, in addition to emailing the student body through their campus-wide e-publication, the English department chair forwarded the recruitment email to his faculty, who were very helpful in making potential participants aware of the opportunity. As potential participants contacted me, I met with them or emailed them to explain the study and distribute consent forms (see Appendix C). Once a participant signed a consent form, I gave her/him instructions for selecting texts to share with me in the first interview (Appendix D). As a token of my appreciation for their contributions, participants were awarded one ten-dollar gift card for each interview they completed.

The nine participants, referred to by pseudonyms, their institutional affiliations, ages, racial self-identifications, and majors/minors are listed in Table 1 in the order in which they completed their first interviews. The “racial identification” column specifies whether participants typically identify as biracial, multiracial, or monoracial; I also list

the racial labels that indicate participants' multiple heritages. These labels are listed in the same order that participants provided them to me when I asked the students to describe their racial backgrounds. I then provide a brief profile of each participant as a means of introducing them; these profiles are grouped by research settings. The research settings are placed in the order by which I was contacted by the first participant from that college (i.e., the first participant in the study is from Somerco; I next heard from a Kensington student). The participants are introduced in the order in which I interviewed them in relation to the other two participants from that campus.

I believe it is important to mention that these nine profiles of the students were co-constructed with participants: they are here portrayed through a combination of my observations of them, their own words as they described themselves in their interviews and writing samples, and my own impressions of my interactions with each of them. Each profile was shared back with every participant, as I wanted to be sure that my attempts to offer readers an introduction to these young women and men were aligned with the participants' understandings of their own identities as well as the ways they feel they are perceived by others. In pursuing this purpose, I wish to note that while my work seeks in part to disrupt the assumptions Americans are quick to make in terms of equating physical characteristics with race, I have actually included references to traits such as skin tone, hairstyle, hair texture, and eye color in order to present readers with a clearer understanding of the participants' lived realities. In doing so, I recognize that such descriptions are full of tension—these profiles are somewhat problematic in that they can be read in such a way as to reinforce the very shallow understandings of racial identities that I seek to challenge. However, as we are living in a society that accepts and

reinforces superficial notions of racial classification, I felt that omitting these details—problematic as they are—would paint incomplete portraits of the ways students are often perceived within the problematic society in which we live.

Table 1

Participants

Name	Campus	Age	Racial Identification	Major/Minor
Kya	Somerco	25	Black (Has two biracial parents)	Nursing
Michael	Somerco	18	Biracial (White/Black)	General Studies
David	Kensington	24	Biracial (Hispanic/White)	Business (Professional Sales Minor)
Leila	UBS	19	Multiracial (Guamanian/Black/Asian)	Rehabilitation Psychology
Taylor	UBS	22	Biracial (Black/Hispanic)	English (Telecommunications Track)
Armona	Kensington	18	Biracial (Black/White)	Double Major: Marketing & Management (Double Minor: Psychology & Communications)
Emma	Kensington	19	Black (Believes father to be multiracial, uncertain of heritages)	Psychology (Spanish Minor)
Gabby	Somerco	20	Multiracial (Father is Black, mother is multiracial)	Criminal Justice & Law Enforcement
Brandee	UBS	21	Black (Mother is Black, father is biracial)	Criminal Justice

Somerco Community College participants.**Kya.**

Age: 25

Racial Identity: Identifies as Black; has two biracial parents. Father is Black and Native American and Mother is Black and White (Irish).

Major: Nursing

Kya was the first participant who signed up for the study, the first and only person to respond to the mass student email sent to the entire Somerco student body. Upon meeting her, I was immediately struck by her contagious smile. She has a sunny disposition--a cheerful, upbeat voice, dark skin, and bright blonde hair with her black roots showing in a way that looks stylish and edgy--the first time I met her, she wore her hair loose in a very cute pixie cut, and her bright lipstick struck me as particularly memorable. Her relatively dark skin and facial features that are typically associated with being Black did not readily suggest a multiracial identity to me; she agreed in one of our interviews that part of the reason she identifies as Black in spite of having two biracial parents is because others assume she is Black. However, she also noted that her Black culture is the one she most strongly relates to, and the one that was present in her home, as she was raised by her father and her Black stepmother.

Kya is one of eleven children (her mother had five girls; her father had four girls and two boys), and she describes her earlier childhood as dysfunctional, noting that her mother was abandoned by Kya's grandmother as a baby when her mother's "color started showing." Kya's mother's experiences included drugs, sexual violence, and jail; interestingly, Kya developed a love of writing when she and her incarcerated mother sent each other letters throughout Kya's childhood. She grew up attending school in and

outside of a large Mid-Atlantic city, and described being angry when she switched from urban “all Black” elementary and middle schools to enroll in a high school outside of the city that served mostly White students. Kya’s anger stemmed from her realization that she and other classmates—those who were of color and from poverty—were very far behind more privileged peers.

Kya has curves and is proud of them—she wrote one of her English essays on being a “Plus-sized” enthusiast. A talented writer in her chosen genre of poetry, Kya writes about racial topics both in and outside of school; she struggles a bit with the writing that is expected of her in her English class, often experiencing frustration as she loses points for formatting and grammar issues. She maintained a positive attitude throughout the semester of data collection, and her grade in English steadily improved. She thanked me after her involvement in the study, saying that it was the highlight of her semester and that she would like to be involved in any future research I design to study writing. Kya’s involvement in this project has truly been transformative for her; in subsequent conversations, she shared with me that our discussion during her first interview gave her the courage to be a bit more vocal on social media regarding her views on racial issues. She has also reached out to *Echoes & Visions*, a literary magazine at Somerco, after I suggested she submit work for possible publication; she even attended the magazine’s editorial board meeting.

Michael.

Age: 18

Racial Identity: Identifies as Biracial; White and Black.

Major: General Studies

Michael came to me from a friend of his; a student who heard me advertising the study in an English class gave me his contact information. He is tall and describes himself as “light-skinned,” a label that the world seems to agree with—he is sometimes assumed to be White, as evidenced by a box checked by a police officer identifying his race on a recent traffic ticket. Michael’s mother is White, his father is Black, but when asked how he categorizes himself, he replied, “light-skinned,” and he describes typically checking both Black and White boxes when asked to fill out forms. Michael reports that he identifies more strongly with the White side of his heritage; he lives with his mother and was raised with three siblings (Michael notes that they, too, are all biracial, and all different “shades”). Michael prefers to date White women and has plenty of White friends, though he also reports having friends of other racial backgrounds.

Michael wears his hair cut short, but it does seem to have the kinkiness associated with Black hair (which made me wonder why the aforementioned officer would assume he is a monoracial White man). He is Black enough, however, that he noted that if he gets pulled over, he “keeps his hands on his lap” so police can see them at all times. His hair and eyes are dark, and he can often be seen smiling in the hallways at Somerco. He is a little more reserved in interpersonal interactions than some of the other participants, but also comes across as quite friendly and eager to please in his interviews; he seemed to become more comfortable throughout the process as his interview answers were validated. Michael doesn’t much like writing but does enjoy video games. He’s a line cook at a chain restaurant near Kensington, a setting he described often as he talked about race in his daily life.

Gabby.

Age: 20

Racial Identity: Identifies as Multiracial. Father is Black; Mom has Black, White (Including German ancestry), and Native American heritages.

Major: Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement

Gabby is a former student of mine; she responded to a direct invitation from me asking her if she was interested in participating when I reached out to her through her personal email after other recruitment methods still left me desiring a third participant. Gabby has very pale skin (she's actually albino, and her parents ended up changing the name they'd planned to give her upon meeting her at birth. Her real name reflects her parents' reaction to the birth of a daughter who was "super pale" "with a head full of blonde hair," as described by Gabby). To many people, Gabby looks White: Her hair is not only blonde, it is an extremely light blonde (the first time she engaged in group work in my class, when I asked her team to come up with a name for themselves, they decided on The Blondies). Currently, she has dyed her hair red; she has very pale bluish-gray eyes and vision problems that enable her to receive special accommodations in the classroom.

Gabby is very outgoing and outspoken, tall, and commands attention. She laughs frequently and has no problem expressing her opinions in the classroom, whether they appear to be being popularly received or not. Gabby wants to go into law enforcement, a choice her Black father is not thrilled with, but one which Gabby is extremely passionate about ("I wanna be the face of police officers," she says). Her mother, who is multiracial (Black, White, and Native American) is not in Gabby's life; Gabby noted that she chose drugs and men over her family. Gabby enjoys a very close relationship with her father, even though he disapproves of her field of study. She has four older siblings, all of

whom are frequently considered Black; thus, Gabby's White appearance has distinguished her from her family her entire life.

Kensington University participants.

David.

Age: 24

Racial Identity: Identifies as biracial; Hispanic (Latino; Salvadorian) and White.

Major: Business, Professional Sales Minor

I first interviewed David on "Top-Floor Tuesday," a day when all of the students in the business school are supposed to dress to impress. Accordingly, David dressed very professionally on our first meeting. To many people, David appears White. He noted that when meeting new people, they often don't realize he is part Hispanic until they ask about his last name, a common Hispanic name, though the "z" that would have been the last letter in his surname was changed to an "s" when David's father immigrated to this country from El Salvador. His father first came to the region where this research was conducted as a foreign exchange student, and the family that hosted him later assisted his return to the U.S. upon hearing about violence and political unrest in El Salvador. David was born in the same geographic region where he now attends school at Kensington.

David wears a cross around his neck and talks readily about his faith (he is being mentored to go into ministry at a local, conservative church in the region). He hopes to use his business degree so that one day, he can pastor a church without taking a salary, thus enabling all church revenue to utilized for better serving the community. David has dark hair and dark eyes and light skin, he comes across as quiet and a little reserved until he warms up to you in conversation. He is very passionate about Jesus. Interestingly, he is an alumnus of one of the other research sites, Somerco Community College, where he

has actually been published in their award-winning literary magazine (a native of the geographic region his entire life, he transferred to KU from Somerco). His email signature is very professional, proclaiming his status as a contributing writer to KU's student newspaper as well as his declared major and minor. He also uses this text to indicate the faith he is unashamed of, including both a Bible verse and his designation as SGA representative for a Christian club on campus as the final lines of his signature.

Armona.

Age: 18

Racial Identity: Identifies as Biracial; Black and White (Portuguese).

Double Major: Marketing and Management, Double Minor in Psychology & Communications

Armona is an academically accomplished KU freshman, one of the two youngest participants in this study. My first impression of her based on her athletic attire was that she must be into sports—not only did that turn out to be true, but it is also a defining element of her identity. Softball is very important to her; she plays for KU and has played her whole life. She hails from New England where her father coaches softball at the high school level, and she describes her racial background as Black and Portuguese. Armona has relatively light skin, a friendly smile with deep dimples, long hair, and an athletic build. It was interesting to me that she said in the interview that she often identifies as Black because that's what others see her as, when based on my first impression of her skin tone and hair texture, I would not have assumed her to be automatically categorized as Black by others. Armona's name is Portuguese; she was actually named after a Portuguese island.

Like David, Armona identifies as Christian—she wears a cross and is involved in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She is a high achiever in the honors college and is

in competition with the rest of the softball team to log the most weekly hours in the library. Armona is a double major and a double minor who was able to begin taking many upper level classes her first semester at Kensington due to the AP credits she earned in high school; her academic schedule is quite intense for a college athlete who is also an Olympic weightlifting hopeful! From a family of teachers, Armona's academic identity and her reputation are very important to her. She mentioned to me after the recording was over that she had shared with her parents that she was participating in this study, and they were amused at the need for a study like this--Armona has explained that she is from a very diverse and inclusive town; she notes that she gets the feeling that people are far more curious about her racial identity here than they would be back in her hometown. While she still dealt with the "what are you" question back home, she felt that the inquiries were positive and curious in nature, as the area is comprised of many ethnically and racially diverse people who are genuinely interested in valuing the backgrounds of others; whereas here, the question leaves her feeling more exoticized or othered, as multiraciality does not seem nearly as common. She is one of two people of color in her honors English class, and the only person of color on her softball team.

Emma.

Age: 19

Racial Identity: Identifies as Black. Mother is Black; Emma believes her father to be "Mixed," most likely Black and White, though she is not certain.

Major: Psychology, Spanish Minor

Emma is on the tall side for a woman, "plus-size-ish" (her words), with light skin she often describes as "caramel," and a long weave that she wore in twists the day I first met her. She has dark eyes that have a slight slant to them, and she has a very pretty smile (though she has written about being self-conscious of her crooked teeth) and a quiet

laugh. Emma described growing up and attending schools in several impoverished areas across the East coast; she noted that she had severed a relationship with her abusive father. Her demeanor is one of someone who is shy or sometimes uncertain; by her own description, Emma noted that she is socially awkward. She was a bit hesitant during both interviews and seemed easily distracted, saying, “wait, what?” in the middle of her own sentence on more than one occasion. However, Emma’s contributions are some of the richest data collected throughout this study. She is an incredible writer; and seemed to absolutely thrive as she was offered the opportunity to discuss her work. During her first interview, she eagerly shared personal writing samples beyond the required two texts.

Emma describes her biological father as “mixed,” though she is unsure of his exact heritage, but she writes frequently exploring her racial identity. After her first interview (when I told her she reminded me of one of my White friends), she noted that she often hears about how “White” she is, despite the fact that her physical appearance leaves little question that she identifies and is identified by others as a woman of color. Emma hopes to earn her doctorate in psychiatry one day. She was very upfront about some of her struggles with depression. Emma has really enjoyed participating in the study, noting that she “didn’t want to leave” during the first interview, and making it clear that she wanted to participate not because she wanted to earn a gift card, but because she enjoyed talking about writing and her racial identity.

University of Bay South participants.

Leila.

Age: 19

Major: Rehabilitation Psychology

Racial Identity: Identifies as Multiracial; Guamanian, Black, and Asian (Korean).

Leila's most prominent feature is her hair--it is fairly straight and dark and very long, reaching her waist--she wore it down when we met, and she noted during the interview that growing her hair out is a way of recognizing her Guamanian heritage. Leila's skin is very pale--she could be mistaken for White, even though she describes her racial make-up as Guamanian, Black, and Korean. Her light skin draws plenty of attention to her since she attends a HBU. She asked me upon meeting me what I "thought she was," and while I was reluctant to guess, saying I didn't want to offend her, my guess of Black and Asian was on the right track, as she smiled and nodded before describing her heritage more accurately.

Though her skin is so fair that many of her classmates assume she is White, Leila's speech patterns, out of all of the participants (perhaps she and Kya would be tied), are probably the most reflective of what many people would describe as African American English (AAE). Her word choices could also be categorized as young/hip/urban. For example, she used the adjective "lit" when she described how she feels about the increased character count on Twitter, and "fresh" when she was talking about a pair of shoes she was wearing in a photo. At the time of data collection, Leila was nineteen years old, though she did turn twenty shortly after completing her second interview. She informed me that she would like to teach someday, maybe at UBS. She led me to my final participant, Brandee, and had proposed participation to at least one of her other friends. Brandee noted during the introduction Leila facilitated that Leila is "always writing something."

Taylor.

Age: 22

Racial Identity: Identifies as Biracial; Black and Hispanic (Puerto Rican)

Major: English, Telecommunications Track

Taylor is a senior who is working on her fifth year at UBS. Like Leila, she exercises extreme social media savvy. Taylor uses writing on such platforms to encourage and uplift others, and is extremely open about her struggles with depression and anxiety, in hopes that she might help someone else. Though she seems exceptionally proficient with many of the popular social media sites, she was unsure where to turn in trying to set up her own blog. Taylor is all about positivity, and her appearance suggests that she takes care to follow fashion trends; she mentioned on more than one occasion that those who know her have been surprised when she has disclosed her battles with self-worth, as Taylor seems to have it so together.

Taylor has medium-dark skin and dark eyes, and she has spoken of herself as not having the curves expected of both African-American and Puerto Rican women. Had she not addressed this topic in her interview, I wouldn't have described her as lacking curves, but she is certainly not overweight, either. She noted that she comes from a fairly wealthy background; she is well-traveled, and she holds what seem to be predominantly conservative views. I find some of Taylor's decisions particularly intriguing in light of those views. For instance, Taylor is involved in NAACP and attends an HBU in spite of what seem to be controversial beliefs for someone who aligns herself with these organizations and institutions—for example, not supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. She noted that her friends sometimes question her Blackness, often declaring that she doesn't have the right to comment on certain issues since she's not fully Black

(which is interesting, since I think most White people would assume her to be Black). On the other hand, people frequently question her Puerto Rican identity, too—it is not uncommon for those she comes in contact with to ask her about her last name, insinuating that she does not appear Hispanic. Taylor is very involved on campus and the community: In addition to her involvement with NAACP, she is in a sorority, works with the boys' basketball team, frequently engages in community service, and is working on implementing a mentoring program she hopes to take to local schools.

Brandee.

Age: 21

Racial Identity: Identifies as Black. Mother is Black; Father is Black and Asian.

Major: Criminal Justice

Brandee is very soft-spoken, she struck me as shy after our initial meeting, which participant Leila arranged. By the end of the first interview, I would stand by my original impression of her as soft-spoken, but what I had initially felt was Brandee's shyness is probably more of a reflection of her quiet demeanor, rather than a dislike of social interactions—she noted that she enjoyed participating in the interviews, and we discussed very personal topics with each other during our time together, including what it was like for Brandee to be one of very few people of color in some previous academic settings—I explained to her that her insights were helping me to understand some of the challenges my daughter might encounter. We also discussed our mutual admiration of tattoos, with each of us describing our own, and Brandee showing me pictures of hers at the end of the second interview.

Brandee identifies as Black, but she also has Asian heritage, which comes from her father's side. Not having a relationship with her father, she expressed regret that she

doesn't know much about this side of her ancestry. Brandee is slender and petite; she wears her long, wavy black hair in a very natural style, and described it in her interview as "kinky, coily" hair. She embraces naturality in a variety of forms, including her hairstyle, her skin care routine, and her dietary preferences. Brandee has dark skin and dark eyes and takes pride in her racial identity, noting that many non-Black people in popular culture envy Blackness. Brandee wants to be a defense attorney, seeking to help women and people of color; she sees many injustices in our legal system and wants to assist those who she believes are prone to receive harsher sentences than convictions warrant.

Brandee writes beautiful poetry, both in a notebook and on her notes app on her phone. She transferred to UBS from a community college in a nearby geographic region of the same state; she spoke at length about attending many predominantly White schools before arriving at UBS, and mentioned that she is sometimes accused of being an "Oreo" for speaking in ways that seem too White to her Black peers. She noted that there's not a lot to do around UBS, a sentiment echoed by Leila. Maybe somewhat surprisingly, Taylor, from a major metropolitan area, did not voice this complaint.

Data Sources

Table 2 summarizes the types of data sources gathered throughout the study; each data source is then discussed in detail.

Table 2

Description of Data Sources

Data Source	Purpose	Requested Number of Data Sources Per Participant
Semi-Structured Interviews	Participants verbalized their own perspectives on identity work through composing practices	2
Writing Samples	Texts served as the basis for many of the interview questions and served as a means for content analysis	8 (4 composed for formal educational contexts; 4 composed outside of formal educational contexts)
Identity Reflection Journaling Activity	This written assignment scaffolded participants' thinking about identity work to help them more explicitly consider how identity and composing are related in preparation for the second interview; it also required them to keep track of their composing practices, providing me with more information about the frequency and types of composing practices with which students engaged	1

Semi-structured interviews. I conducted two semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2016) with eight of the participants, giving participants a minimum of two weeks in between their first and second interview. One participant, Gabby, was able to complete only the first interview. Interviews ranged in length from forty minutes to an hour and forty minutes, with thirteen of the seventeen interviews lasting over an hour,

and with three of the remaining four lasting over fifty minutes. Appendix E includes the interview protocols. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Because, in the words of Glesne (2016), “Questions often emerge in the course of fieldwork and may add to or replace preestablished ones” (p. 96), the semi-structured interviews were suitable for this research design. These interviews allowed me the flexibility to pursue paths of inquiry pertaining to the research questions that were unique to individual participants, as dependent upon the research sites where they attended college, their preferred composing practices, their understanding of their multiracial identities and their lived experiences as multiracial students, and a number of other aspects related to the ways participants engaged in identity work through composing practices. Fetterman (2010) also proclaims that semi-structured interviews are appropriate for situations in which the researcher wishes to design interview questions that value the participants’ perceptions of reality to gain an “insider” perspective; due to my positionality as a White, highly-educated researcher, this sort of protocol assisted me in empowering participants to share with me based on their experiences (as opposed to my assumptions).

Writing samples. I asked students to bring a minimum of two texts written for formal educational contexts and two texts written for any other purposes to each interview. At the conclusion of the interview, I photocopied hard copies of writing samples and uploaded electronic documents participants shared with me to a password protected digital space. Eventually, I retyped or uploaded images of print documents to the secure digital space so as to have electronic access to all data.

These writing samples provided a fuller picture of what the participants said about their literacy experiences, serving as evidence and context to support and clarify participants' assertions regarding their identity work through their composing practices. I believed they could serve as evidence of identity work that participants were engaging in without metacognitively recognizing the work that they were doing. So while the texts supported and validated participants' own interpretations of their identity work, they were also valuable independent data sources.

Because I wanted participants to feel free to choose whichever writing samples they liked to share with me, I did not require that writing samples be a particular length. Thus, the writing samples varied tremendously in length, ranging from screenshots of a few phrases in a text message exchange, to academic essays of a couple pages, to the longest text submitted to me, which was Armona's research-based argument regarding modern racial discrimination in the workplace, a fifteen-page document (including references). One participant, Brandee, opted to share as one of her "texts" a video of minimalist drawings she had recently composed. The writing samples received were representative of depth within cases, depicting rich and robust portraits of participants' composing practices. Table 3 provides an overview of the writing samples each participant contributed; the last column indicates whether or not participants submitted the assigned identity reflection journal activity to me. This final data source will be discussed next.

Table 3

Overview of Writing Samples

Participant	Texts Composed for Formal Educational Contexts	Texts Composed for Non-Formal Educational Contexts	Identity Reflection Journaling Activity Submitted?
Kya	ENG 101: Cause & Effect Essay, Illustration Essay, Extended Definition Essay, Reading Response	Three Handwritten Poems	Yes
Michael	ENG 101: Extended Definition Essay, Outline for An Argumentative Essay, Narrative Essay, Illustration Essay	Three Text Message Exchanges One Screenshot of a Video Game Chat Box	Yes
David	ECON 494: Three Discussion Posts MKTG 337: Internship Report	Blog Post Article for KU's Student Newspaper Lyric Advertisement Copy for a Mug David Designed Photo of the Mug	Yes
Leila	ENG 101: Essay About Multiraciality, Literary Analysis PSYC 205: Interview Demonstrating Balte's Principles SOCI 201: Extra Credit Observation of Gender Stereotypes	Four Poetic Pieces Composed using Notes App on Leila's Phone & Posted to Vsco (Two also included images)	Yes (Leila opted to write a written narrative rather than to fill out the template I supplied to all participants)

Taylor	TELE 355: Blog Post, Case Study	Three Instagram Posts	Yes
	ENG 490: Senior Capstone Essay	Two Blog Posts	
Armona	HONR 111: Argument on Downtown Revitalization, Annotated Bibliography, Research Essay on Modern Racial Discrimination in the Workplace	Two Facebook Posts	No
	CMAT 260: Business Observation	Two Instagram Posts	
Emma	ENG 103: Reading Reaction on Segregation, Outline for Argumentative Essay, Argumentative Essay on Beauty Standards, PowerPoint to Accompany Argumentative Essay	Six Poems (Some also submitted to fulfill requirements of ENG 251)	Yes
Gabby	SOC 101: Two Worldview Essays	Tinder Text Message Exchange	No
		Facebook Post (Featuring a Racially Controversial Video)	
Brandee	CRJS 201: One Essay Exam	Two Poems Composed on the Notes App on Brandee's Phone	Yes
	CRJS 204: Two Essay Exams, One of which included an extra credit assignment	One Video of Several Minimalist Art Drawings Brandee Composed	
	Scholarship Application Essay		

Identity reflection journaling activity. Between the two interviews, I asked participants to select one week to complete an Identity Reflection Journaling Activity. The instructions were handed out to them at the conclusion of the first interview; I

reviewed expectations with all participants and asked that they return their reflective journals during the second interview. This written activity asked participants to keep a record of their composing activities for at least one week, through listing daily and reflecting weekly on the ways that they engaged in identity work through writing and other composing activities. See Appendix F for the instructions that were given to participants.

This reflective journal served as an important data source because the participants and I discussed it in detail during their second interviews—it was also designed to enable them to reflect on how their composing practices allow them to construct, maintain, reject, or explore identities, perhaps in ways they had never considered before completing this activity. The discussion of the written reflection increased the trustworthiness of this study by adding another means of confirming other data sources, but the journals were also examined independently for content analysis. Written responses to questions such as “In the writing you completed this week, what did you express about yourself to others? Which writing activities allowed you to do so?” and “Did any of the composing practices listed above allow you to communicate or explore racial identity? If so, which ones, and how?” provided me with additional artifacts to analyze discoursally. Kitchenham (2010) has written of the usefulness of participant diaries and journals in case study research, noting that these research tools allow participants to share their feelings subjectively, while also allowing the researcher options for a variety of data analysis methodologies. Using a CRT framework for analyzing participants’ identity reflection journals allowed for a deep exploration of the ways in which participants grappled with identity through composing practices.

Data Analysis

I employed a holistic coding scheme (Dey, cited in Saldaña, 2013) in order to make general sense of the transcribed data gained from interviews. The data were chunked in varying lengths as opposed to coded on a strict line-by-line basis, as I assigned new codes whenever the participants transitioned to different topics, an unpredictable and varied phenomenon. I created codes as I saw fit, choosing to label data using codes that I felt identified phenomena surfacing in the interviews related to the research questions; my codebook included codes related to race, to positive and negative writing experiences, to aspects of campus context, to other markers of identity such as language, work, and spirituality, and much more.

Writing samples and identity reflections were also coded holistically, though this time, I limited my holistic coding to rhetorical features of the writing and to inclusion of topics that directly related to my research questions. In coding the writing samples, I engaged in content analysis, defined by Hoffman et. al (2011) as “the inspection of patterns in written texts...the method of making inferences from texts and making sense of these interpretations in a context surrounding the text” (p. 29-30). I employed content analysis as a means of considering how participants represented various aspects of their identity through the compositions they selected to share with me.

Furthermore, I used coding in a bidirectional manner, often referring back to participant interviews as I examined the writing samples. I anticipated that my holistic coding would vary widely, since participants provided me with a large variety of writing composed for different audiences and purposes. Because of this, I chose to first code the interviews and then the identity reflections horizontally across cases, in an effort to

develop an overall sense of the complexity and diversity of multiraciality as manifested through engagement with identity work in all cases. I then coded vertically, on a case by case basis, analyzing all of the writing samples of one particular participant before moving onto the next case.

As I transitioned into second-cycle coding, CRT's assumption that racism is normal in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998) underscored my approach to data analysis, as I adopted a writing-as-method approach to consider the ways that inherent, systemic racism impacts the ways these multiracial college students engaged in identity work through their composing practices. Through this data analysis method, I moved recursively case by case in alignment with scholars such as Colyar (2009) and Richardson (2013), who both proclaim the centrality of the writing process to qualitative research projects. Perhaps St. Pierre (2011) sums this view up best, declaring, "Writing is analysis" (p. 621). St. Pierre so believes in the integrity of writing as thinking that she suggests that researchers forgo the process of coding. Truthfully, I might have preferred to do as she instructs, for I have always struggled with leaping from coding to categorization to themes. But for me, coding was my way of making sure I carefully reviewed each piece of data. The writing, though, was where I felt the in-depth analysis took place.

My methodology reflects my view of the act of writing as a legitimate research method which enabled me to make connections and explore differences across cases. As I finished coding all writing samples holistically, I clarified and refined my thinking about the meaning of the data by reflectively writing about each participant, rereading each of the research questions before I sat down to write. I relied heavily on my CRT

lens to consider the complex and creative ways that the multiracial emergent adult college students in this study navigated and negotiated their identities in a variety of contexts. The abundance of data this study afforded me truly presented a daunting task as I read, re-read, coded, memoed, and employed writing-as-method to attempt to determine how the over twenty hours of recorded interview data and upwards of sixty writing samples could best be condensed into a meaningful analysis that responded to the overarching question, “How do multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts?”

In recognizing the important role writing plays in shaping my findings, I am responding to the call made by Colyar (2009) and others to more explicitly recognize the essentiality of writing to the research process. Colyar argues that writing is sense-making, and I agree. Through my journey of becoming a qualitative researcher, the writing process has remained my primary way of thinking and analysis, and one that is far underrepresented in research methods literature. It was important for me to explain this view here, as it is fundamental to the way I not only present, but also interpret, findings. Pelias (2011) argues that writing is both *realization* and *record*. All scholars in the academy recognize writing as record; such is the practice of disseminating our findings. Pelias’s embracing of writing as realization, however, resonates with me. He explains that “Writers come to realize what they believe in the process of writing...it is the process of ‘writing into’ rather than ‘writing up’ a subject” (p. 660). Knowing that it would be through the writing process that I would best come to understand how my participants’ experiences could provide insight to my research questions, I used writing-as-method in the following way: After finishing the coding of all of a participant’s

writing samples, I reviewed each data source, re-read my research questions, and then began to write a profile of that participant. As I moved onto the next participant, and wrote the second profile, I turned back to the previous case, re-read the first profile, and then began composing a document which was my preliminary record of emergent findings. In this manner, I continued alternating between writing deep into each single case, and then revisiting and revising the exploratory and expanding document that was becoming my initial understanding of the themes that I eventually describe here.

Quality Assurances

To establish trustworthiness, I utilized the following strategies recommended by Creswell (2014): Multiple data sources, thick description, acknowledging my own biases, and member checking. Participants contributed multiple sources of data (Stake, 2005) through self-selected writing samples, multiple interviews, and the completion of the identity reflection activity. These multiple data sources allowed for confirming/disconfirming data in a variety of modes, providing a deeper understanding of participants' descriptions of their identity work by allowing me to "check" participants' interpretations of what they did in their texts against actual texts themselves. Thick description (Glesne, 2016) was used to detail findings, allowing for as intricate an understanding of the cases as possible. Furthermore, I worked to ensure credibility as described by Shenton (2004) in the following ways: holding "frequent debriefing sessions" (p. 67) with my research mentor, participating in "scrutiny of the research project" (p. 67) with my dissertation committee, and engaging in my own "reflective commentary" (p. 68) by writing memos throughout data collection and analysis.

Furthermore, I exercised reflexivity (Pelias, 2011) as I desired to be transparent with my own biases throughout the research process. I memoed frequently, exploring how my marriage to a Black man and my status as a mother to children of color shaped the way I perceived data and interpreted findings. Through doing this, I was following the advice of the SAGE Research Methods Project Planner that challenges researchers to engage in reflexivity by “explicitly and carefully assess[ing] themselves in terms of social position and assumptions. They should make their potential biases explicit to others, and take account of them in designing, carrying out, and interpreting their research” (2016, p. 2). I took this task seriously, memoing on a weekly basis throughout the data collection process and continuing to consider the ways that my positionality affected me as I began employing writing-as-method.

Finally, I utilized member checking to share my interpretation of findings with participants. I share Glesne’s (2016) conception of member checking, which dismisses the notion of sharing pages of transcriptions with participants, arguing that this practice is cumbersome and awkward for members of the study. Instead, Glesne suggests sharing portions of drafts “in which a person’s words appear” (p. 212) to verify that the participant agrees the responses are correct and the researcher’s interpretations are useful. Glesne advocates for asking participants if they have additional interpretations or suggestions. I followed Glesne’s advice, emailing all participants a bulleted summary of my emergent findings regarding their case, the draft of the “introduction” I’d written to describe them in the “Participants” section of this chapter, and the several pages I’d written about their case as I engaged in writing-as-method. Throughout this process, no participant objected to my interpretations, though one of them, Emma, did provide me

with two corrections, one pertaining to my description of her hairstyle and another regarding a word choice that I did not decipher correctly as I read her handwritten poetry. She also provided a few other comments regarding my analysis of her poems, all of which I revisited upon receiving her feedback and shared back with her again in an effort to make sure I represented her writings in a way with which she was comfortable.

Additionally, I disclosed the aforementioned biases associated with my own positionality to the participants as I met them, making it clear that the research was personal to me, but that I did not wish my own experiences to prevent me from understanding their lived realities. The second interviews often served as opportunities for me to clarify participants' earlier responses, or ask participants if my understanding of a composition seemed to be representative of what they were trying to do through writing.

CHAPTER IV

To Write (or Not) About (My) Race? That is the Question.

“My last paper, I wrote about race. Um... it didn’t go so well.”— Kya

I began this study seeking to examine the ways that multiracial emergent adult college students engaged in identity work through their composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts. In exploring this phenomenon, four sub-questions guided my inquiry:

- 1) How do multiracial emergent adult college students describe their identities as they experience them in their composing practices?
- 2) How do texts composed in and out of formal educational contexts authored by multiracial emergent adult college students communicate authors’ racial and other identities to their intended audiences?
- 3) What role does campus context play in the ways that multiracial emergent adult college students engage in identity work through composing practices at three different contexts: An open-admissions community college, a Historically Black University, and a more selective, Predominantly White Institution within the same geographic region?
- 4) In what ways do various literacy contexts privilege or deny the expression of racialized identities for multiracial emergent adult college students?

In exploring these questions, I will now discuss three themes that emerged from the data to describe the ways the participants engaged in identity work through their composing practices in and out of formal educational contexts: The multiracial emergent adult college students in this study participated in identity work through composing practices by 1) Selectively engaging in racial identity work, 2) Overtly engaging in racial

identity work, and 3) Transcending race through composing practices. In presenting these findings, I have opted to organize the discussion of participant data in consideration of the extent to which the theme being explored was present in the case of the individual participant. Thus, some participants' cases are revisited more than once in the following analysis. While I did give careful consideration to all research questions, rather than address each question in a linear manner, I have chosen to weave information relevant to individual sub-questions throughout the presentation of these findings as the information pertains to the theme being discussed. I believe that this method of organization alleviates confusion that might have resulted from me attempting to address each question one at a time as I drew from varied data sources across cases which may have resulted in redundancy and disconnection, being that I reviewed nine cases for each question. Instead, I hope to help readers more clearly understand the themes that describe participants' engagement in identity work through their composing practices as they became apparent to me by focusing on each theme, one at a time.

These participants and everyone else in the world engages in identity work every single day, through writing and everything else that we do. Identity, being in part comprised of a series of behaviors and decisions enacted moment to moment, frequently morphing from context to context, is an ever-shifting concept, as has been described by Holland et. al (1998), Merchant (2005) and others. Some behaviors and decisions, such as that of a woman hurriedly reapplying her favorite brand of lip gloss, or of an automobile owner driving a particular car, perhaps one adorned with bumper stickers, are performed with very little conscious attention to the task at hand. On the other hand, we also participate in numerous activities that demand a greater level of effort and

concentration, such as successfully interviewing for the job of our dreams, or using all of our speed and strength to attempt to catch a competing runner during the home stretch of a distance race. Such is the case with engaging in identity work through writing and other composing practices: we post pictures to Facebook of our friends and family, perhaps desiring to project a certain image of ourselves, or perhaps without being intentional in the way we are crafting our desired identities for our “friends”—yet, we may pause over whether or not to post that political status update which we know will result in our being perceived in a particular, perhaps negative, way.

Sometimes our composing practices are overt intentions to assert our identities: I am a doctoral student attempting to justify, through this writing, that I deserve the title Ed.D. behind my name. Students write to demonstrate their mastery of course content. A poet painstakingly crafts a line, admiring her ability to capture the power of her emotions in a single phrase. A lover sends a playful text including hearts and smiley faces to the recipient—is this act a little less conscious than the poet’s? The person composing the text is aware that the use of an emoji sends a particular message to the one who reads it—is it a purposeful act intended to continue influencing the way the audience views the author? Or is it more habitual, less intentional? On the spectrum of awareness, some composing practices are undertaken with less thought given to the identity one constructs or maintains when engaging: writing a grocery list, maybe, or perhaps jotting down appointments and reminders on your giant desk calendar. If you look at my giant desk calendar, you will gain quite a bit of information about me, further your understanding of who I am and what my life is like—but I assure you, when I wrote down, “Rashieme, Dr. 3:00” or “Dept Meeting, 1:00 BH 327” I gave no thought at all to

what this series of texts communicated about me, though of course I had a purpose for writing them.

These examples illustrate that engaging in identity work through composing is a process as near constant as the composing itself. Following Williams (2006), Ivanic (1998), and Hyland (2002), I argue that all texts say *something* about the people who compose them. We participate in this work, sometimes as active builders, approaching a composing task with a rock solid image of who we want to be through whatever it is we are writing (or drawing or posting or freestyling), maybe knowing as we begin exactly how we can accomplish our goal, maybe attempting to figure it out as we go. Other times, we are less aware of the ways we not only shape our texts, but the ways our texts shape us, at least in the minds of the audiences who will respond to them. So it is with the ways in which the nine participants in this study engaged in identity work, including racial identity work, through their authoring of texts both in and out of formal educational contexts.

Sometimes participants were very aware of the ways they wished to be perceived, and sometimes those perceptions included particular racial identities. Not infrequently, the identity work extended beyond the page, as there were instances in which participants did not write to overtly project an intended identity, but rather, they wrote to discover it. Other times, participants were less conscious of what their writing samples communicated about them. Some participants discussed their texts with great certainty, expressing utter faith in their capabilities as authors to convey desired representations of selves to others. Other participants were less sure of what their writing said about them, or they saw some texts as unrelated to their identities. While their attitudes about writing

and the types of composing they participated in clearly influenced the way they described expressing their own identities as they revisited their chosen texts, all participants graciously discussed their lives as students and people of color, as writers and multiracial individuals, as young adults navigating diverse personal journeys and a plethora of career paths. Regardless of the frequency of their composing practices or the opinions participants held of themselves as writers, all nine students demonstrated that through words and images, personal pronouns or lack thereof, and choices to write or not write about race or their own racial identity, their composing practices enabled them to present themselves in a variety of ways, sometimes crossing, blurring, or erasing racial lines in the process. It is this navigation of racial identity that these findings focus on, as I examine how multiracial identity is manifested through writing and other compositions.

“I Know Who I Am”: Themes of Identity Work

Though I could have easily written a novel about each of my nine participants, or devoted an entire dissertation to exploring any one of these nine cases, here I present the most prominent patterns that emerged as I rigorously and recursively wrote my own way into what I hope is a meaningful understanding of how these young people engage in identity work through their composing practices, particularly racial identity work.

That there were patterns is, in itself, delightful—the participants came from such varied racial backgrounds, viewed their multiraciality as playing wildly different roles in their lives (ranging from definitional to barely acknowledged), were enrolled at three different campuses, studied vastly different majors and minors, had various goals for themselves when it came to school and their future careers, and thought of themselves as highly accomplished writers, not good at writing, or somewhere in between. They were

diverse in terms of gender, spiritual beliefs, and age: both the low and high end of the defining age bracket were represented, with the youngest participants being 18, the oldest 25, and everybody else somewhere in between. Thus, though I stand firm in the patterns that came into focus through multiple rounds of data analysis of the writing and conversations these nine students offered, I would not dare to claim that the patterns found here represent “the” multiracial experience, which is surely an audacious claim no matter the type of research, as multiraciality is so multifaceted. Still, I must admit that for every noticeable common theme across cases that I came to understand, there are numerous differences that time and page constraints do not allow me to explore.

What I am certain of resonates with something said by David in our first interview together—when asked if our country’s recent attention to race impacts the way he thinks about himself, David responded, “I know who I am.” Similarly, I know what I know: These findings are rich and telling, and while not generalizable, certainly illuminate the ways a variety of students position themselves through their creation of texts in a diverse array of literacy spaces. I here explore the three themes that emerged across cases: selectively engaging in racial identity work, overtly engaging in racial identity work, and transcending race through composing practices. While every participant demonstrated selectivity in deciding whether or not to engage in racial identity work through writing, the second two themes, also present in multiple participants’ composing practices, are in themselves variations of selectivity. Both overt engagement in racial identity work and the transcendence of racial identity are two phenomena present in participants’ composing practices that illustrate the complex identity work that can occur when participants exercise selectivity in deciding to write about their racial identities.

Selectivity: “If,” “When,” & “Which”

Selectivity refers to the discernment students used when deciding whether or not to engage in identity work through composing practices. In the instances in which participants chose to use composing to project or explore their racial identities, I also use the term “selectivity” to describe the fluid negotiation that often arose when participants chose to focus on singular aspects of their multiraciality (i.e., Black, Latino, or any monoracial components of their identities) versus their multiple racial heritages or identities as people of color.

In online and other writing spaces, participants exercised agency through their composing practices by deciding if and when they would explore their racial identities. If the decision was yes, selectivity was further observed by examining which aspects of their racial identities they chose to engage. David “reserves” his Hispanic heritage as a way to lend credibility to opinions he thinks others would critique if they assume him to be White. Armona also exercises selectivity in writing an essay regarding modern discrimination in the workplace. While her research enabled her to contextualize possible obstacles she may face in the future as a woman of color, she chose not to write about her own racial identity throughout the scope of the assignment, perhaps because she deemed the academic genre as inappropriate for including her own personal racial identity, or perhaps because in learning to master “White” written language, she has been socialized in such a way as to avoid revealing non-White aspects of identity in her formal academic writings. Many participants described refraining from writing about race, at least in public literacy contexts, citing beliefs that people are unlikely to change their minds after developing racist or uninformed opinions. All of these instances of the

selectivity participants exercised in engaging in racial identity work through their composing practices are discussed in detail below, examined beneath subheadings that demonstrate selectivity as performed through questions of “if,” “when,” and “which.” I then explore the theme of selectivity as it emerged across campus contexts at the three research sites, exploring how college environments played roles influencing participants’ selective decisions to use composing practices for racial identity work. In this discussion, quotation marks indicate words that were taken directly from participants’ interviews and writing samples, except as I use them to indicate that I am addressing the subthemes of “if,” “when,” and “which.”

The question of “if”: “If I’m just gonna shoot off my mouth, I’m no better than they are.” Of course all participants’ work can be used to answer the question of “if.” Every piece of writing they brought to their interviews either allowed them to write about or think about their racial identities, or it did not. What follows here is a description of cases that show particularly complex portraits of students whose interview data indicated that the “if” question was salient in one or more of the writing samples they chose to share. These are the cases examined in detail here.

When it comes to examining the question of “if,” David, who is from Kensington, shares interesting insight through his interview data in describing whether or not he will assert his racial identity in writing. Of all of the participants, David—and Taylor, whose case will be discussed later—seem most likely to question the CRT framework I used to examine data. I feel it is necessary to disclose this information, as David’s conservative views and sometimes measured responses to racial controversies seem at times to be contradictory to foundations of CRT. However, David has experienced marginalization

as a biracial individual. In speaking with me regarding a conversation he had on campus with two White Professors and a Black classmate, David shared the following:

My normal was diversity. And that was one of the statements I made to professors, in that conversation, and they, they were like, that's weird. [David laughs]. And I'm like, to them, it's acceptable to be one or the other, but if you're mixed, it's just for some reason, that's an anomaly, like, that is not acceptable in their world.

David reports that he has used his racial identity to communicate through writing from time to time, particularly on social media in the racially charged election season that preceded Trump's presidency. Most often, David notes that he "reserves" revealing his biraciality in writing for instances in which he feels he needs to legitimize his views, using his Hispanic heritage as a "stamp of approval" or a "stamp of authority," allowing him a voice to which he feels others may believe he should not have otherwise been entitled, had he been born to two White parents. David's mother is White, and his father is Hispanic: With light skin himself, David often passes for a monoracial White man, thus, revealing his Hispanic heritage is also something David does occasionally in face-to-face conversations. In this way, though not in any of the writing samples he chose to submit for the study, David describes participating in written exchanges and using his biracial identity to combat instances in which he sees others using race "as a bludgeon" to back people into corners. Interestingly, in a different context, Taylor, who attends school at the HBU, UBS, is targeted for the "bludgeoning" that David describes, for the very aspect of her racial identity that lends David his credibility: Hispanic heritage. While David's Latino identity legitimizes his views for those who focus on his Whiteness, Taylor described navigating criticism of her Puerto Rican identity, as she felt her peers

were attempting to delegitimize her Blackness. Taylor's case is discussed further in the themes of overt racial identity work and transcendence.

Another interesting phenomenon regarding David's perception of his relationship between race and writing is found in examining his reasons for starting a blog, one of which David identified as a desire to disrupt notions that the area he grew up in is full of White racists. The primary purpose of his blogging is to highlight tourist attractions and, in David's words, "the beautiful landscape, people and culture" of the geographic area where David was born and raised, which happens to be where he attends college, too. David's first blog post and the descriptive texts and images on the site that welcome readers seem race-neutral, despite David's claim that the blog was created in part to counter notions of racism in his community. David does include his last name in identifying himself as the author, and his last name, arguably, projects a Hispanic identity (when his father immigrated to the U.S., the last letter in his surname was actually changed from a "z" to an "s"—so even the inclusion of David's last name on his blog is not a clear sign that David is a person of color, even if readers presume that last names are reliable indicators of ethnicity). Nowhere on the blog, though, is race directly mentioned, yet David explained to me that one of his primary goals in creating this platform was

to try and point out, you know, that there's a lot more here... than, uh, racist White people. Honestly that was... honestly, that was one of the reasons why, cuz my first year [at Kensington University], I found that there was a lot of prejudice against local people.

Because it may have been possible that David's explanation was influenced by his understanding of my study, in our follow-up interview, I suggested that his knowledge of my interest in racial identities may have impacted his telling me that his blog was

designed to counter notions of our geographic region as filled with White racists. David remained firm, assuring me that he had not responded in an effort to give me an answer I wanted to hear. Thus, though not yet obvious to me (or perhaps other potential readers), David's blog is serving as a space in which he feels he can find a voice to combat perceptions of racism. His desire to use writing to do this seems related to both his White and Hispanic identities. Often presumed to be White, and, in fact, recognizing his Whiteness as an element of himself, David rejects presumptions that equate Whiteness with racism, and in doing so, offers a conception of Whiteness that counters the one he feels is used to stereotype local White people. Additionally, because he is a multiracial, educated young man, David's intended purpose for the blog—to show that there is "more" to the area than "racist White people" is already achieved in the act of writing and posting his entries: his multiracial voice innately disrupts the perception of "White" as "only." His plans to depict the "cultures and peoples" of the geographic area in which he lives, worships, and studies also reflect a desire to highlight the multiculturalism and diversity present in his community. Given his thoughtful demeanor, logical decision making, and practice of generally refraining from writing about racially charged issues, David's blog reflects the notion of selectivity, as he refrains from overtly calling attention to his biraciality or any other aspect of his racial identity while still seeking to disrupt notions of White racism.

It is worth noting that his genuine passion for his hometown and the surrounding areas is clearly reflected in his rejection of the negative stereotypes he feels shape outsiders' perceptions of people local to the area. David described speaking with many Kensington students and even professors who assume that those born in the area are, for

the most part, racist White Trump supporters. His desire to disrupt this stereotype, while related to race, is also not limited to race. In his interviews, David seems as concerned with perceptions of local people as uneducated or uncultured as he does with the perception that we, the locals, are a bunch of racists. Even when faced with offensive comments about Hispanics from others who presume him to be White, David says he exercises patience and selectivity in deciding whether or not to reveal his biracial identity. While unafraid of standing up for his beliefs, David feels that trying to be an empathetic listener will ultimately allow him to make more progress with someone than voicing an immediate emotional reaction. He phrased it this way in his interview:

Jenny: So when you're hearing some of these remarks [David had previously noted his presence in conversations that included remarks such as "We gotta flush the brown down back to Mexico!"], do you ever reveal your biracial identity? Do you just stay silent and let...?

David: It depends. It depends, 'cause I don't want to offend that person. You know, um, 'cause it's a, to me it's a matter of understanding. And if you can get someone to understand what you're saying, then they start to see, the, the truth in the matter. Um, you know, if I'm just gonna shoot off my mouth, I'm no better than they are. So.

Jenny: That's very mature of you.

David: [Nods]. It's something my dad has taught me.

The discretion David uses in deciding whether or not to share his biracial identity in face to face conversations is mirrored in his writing practices. Though he does occasionally call upon his biracial identity in writing as described above, David often refrains from writing about racially charged issues online, stating, "I try to ignore it sometimes," citing the media's sensationalizing of racial controversy and people's unlikelihood to consider different opinions as reasons for opting not to engage in written

debates online. Knowing David's feelings regarding when and how to address race (in writing, and in general) sheds light on how he sees his blog as disruptive to perceived notions of racism without explicitly writing about his own racial identity.

In visiting the question of "if," it is important to highlight those participants who generally abstained from writing about their personal racial identities, namely, Michael and Brandee. Brandee was the only participant who saw none of her writing samples as being related to race. The texts she shared with me included four essays written for courses required by her criminal justice major (three exams and one extra credit assignment), an essay she wrote as part of a scholarship application, two poems she wrote outside of formal educational contexts, and a video she took on her phone featuring some of her minimalist art sketches.

For all of the above pieces, the fact that race is absent is not necessarily surprising—the essays did address topics relevant in the lives of many people of color, given the systemic racism present in our judicial and policing systems, but discussions of race seemed beyond the scope of Brandee's assignments, which required her to discuss differences between various courts and penal systems, summarizing purposes of such institutions. Brandee did express a belief that America's criminal justice system fails people of color regularly, venturing that she feels

like everything for people of color is set up to fail them in every sense, resources-wise, funding-wise, educational wise. Everything is set up to fail or not really-- You can prosper but you're not really going to get that far because you don't really have as many resources as someone else...

Though she mentions frequently engaging in discussions of racial controversy in the criminal justice classes, particularly those related to cases of police brutality, it is not unexpected that Brandee's views are absent from the objective, expository sorts of texts

she is required to write, the purposes of which she says are to show her instructor that she has learned the required information.

It's also worth noting that though she identifies as Black (and has a biracial Asian and Black father), Brandee has attended mostly predominantly White schools in her life, and as such, is sometimes accused of being an "Oreo," as she speaks and writes in MAE with ease. She explains,

people would tell me that I talk like a white girl or I am white girl just because how proper I talk or because I don't have accent, I guess. I don't know... I don't really take offense to it that I'm an Oreo or whatever you want to call it because I'm okay with talking proper. That's how I'm supposed to talk, so that doesn't really affect me.

Again, the types of writing that Brandee brought to her interviews suggested she was not expected pay any attention to race in her treatment of the assigned topics; however, knowing that she was enrolled in schools who served predominantly White students throughout her early education, perhaps Brandee's writing samples are also illustrating how years of talking and writing "White" reinforce notions that one's own "Other" racial identity has no place in academic writing. Similarly, when writing an essay for a scholarship application, Brandee literally writes about her skin, once again without mentioning race. Brandee's topic for this composition was her preference for natural skin care remedies; she writes that though acne and subsequent scarring made it "very hard" for her to be "comfortable" in her own skin, she eventually found a natural skin care routine that has improved her appearance and self-esteem. She concludes her essay by urging her readers, "Skin care is all about figuring out what works for your skin."

While some might find it ironic that in an essay about the appearance of one's skin, Brandee chooses not to mention her skin color, describing her racial background

was not an element Brandee saw as necessary to her purpose for writing. Interview data indicate an intentional absence of racial identity: Brandee spoke with enthusiasm about how much she enjoyed writing about her natural skin care regimen, hoping that others could relate to her topic and be helped by the useful tips Brandee supplies. In writing this essay, Brandee felt no need to position herself as a person of a particular racial identity, in fact, to do so may have actually further separated her from the vast and diverse audience with which she wished to connect. Brandee saw her topic on facial hygiene as a common area of interest for women of all different backgrounds. This piece is about self-care and maintaining health/appearance, reflecting positive body image, though it is not particular to the color of Brandee's skin.

In discussing her writing habits in general, Brandee said she does not typically write about race. Furthermore, though Brandee does enjoy writing for recreational purposes, unlike many of the participants in this study who do the same, Brandee rarely shares her personal writing. Though she frequently writes poems both in a journal and on her phone, they are mainly written for an audience of one, and Brandee described being very nervous when she did decide to share one poem with a male friend. Confident with who she is, Brandee does not see a reason to write about her own racial identity. As she also does not typically write poetry for audiences, it is unsurprising that she does not use this genre of writing to share musings about racial identity. For Brandee, the answer to the question of "if" she should or should not reveal her race in writing is typically a "no."

The same could be said of Michael, who also demonstrates selectivity in revealing his racial identity through writing, typically refraining from writing about his own racial identity, even though he does address racial topics in assignments for English class. Of

the four academic writing samples he shared with me, one of them was explicitly about race, and two others were more implicitly about race: they included racialized topics, but Michael wrote in generalities that never directly mentioned race in the texts themselves. Yet, Michael's own racial identity was never specifically explored or even mentioned in all of the writing that he did about race.

It could be that Michael chooses not to assert his biracial identity into his texts because the formal academic writing assignments required by his English 101 class may not be perceived by Michael as appropriate forums for discussing personalized racial experiences. He does use the first-person pronoun "I" in one of those essays, though, and he uses it in the one piece that directly addresses race: an extended definition essay entitled "Hatred." In this writing, Michael defines "hate" as "a deep and emotional dislike for something," and goes on to use racial examples such as the Holocaust, the killing of Black male Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson, and the overall existence of racism (which, Michael writes, "isn't just about white and black anymore") to illustrate the presence of hatred in our world. Michael references himself through his use of pronouns three times in the essay:

"I'm sure everyone has heard the phrase, "I hate you!". Tell me that phrase doesn't mean something when you hear it" (Introduction).

"Stereotypes and racism, I believe go hand in hand" (Body paragraph about racism).

"Many things cause hatred, and I believe many thins [sic] contribute to it but it's about how it is treated and don't let it build up or you will finally burst and must deal with the consequences" (Conclusion, final sentence).

It is interesting that the only body paragraph in which Michael inserts himself into the text via his use of "I" is the one about racism. Had he felt that it was an appropriate

place to include aspects of himself beyond mentioning “I,” he may have written about some of the experiences he shared with me in our interviews, such as how he is careful to keep his hands in plain view when he’s been pulled over, so as to not give a police officer any reason to erroneously think he’s reaching for a weapon. Perhaps he could have written about how, in a summer job context, a Black co-worker told him to look around, and he realized they were the only two people of color employed, when the same co-worker noted that he’d seen many other Black applicants turned away before Michael, who has relatively light skin, was hired. He might have even included observations regarding his current place of employment, where he has watched as supervisors of color who have been at the company for years take significantly longer to progress in their careers than a recently promoted White woman, whom Michael felt received preferential treatment.

Perhaps the context of English class stifled Michael, preventing him from using writing to share these experiences, even thought they would have assisted in proving his point. However, it is equally possible that it did not occur to Michael that these examples would have strengthened his writing, if he was even permitted to include personal experience. Michael confided with me that he has trouble with elaboration in writing for school, and that, even when writing via text message, frequently hears from females that his communication is too brief: “I’ve been told I don’t show a lot of emotion.... In general. Like writing, people, talking.” Furthermore, he was frank with me about not enjoying writing, and particularly disliking his English class. While many participants seemed to have been drawn to the study due to either their interest in writing or discussing racial issues, Michael was recruited via snowball sampling. He seemed to

enjoy sharing experiences related to being biracial, but was very honest that he was unsure as to what his writing might show the intended audiences about himself, whereas most participants had ready answers when asked that question about the various texts they shared with me.

In terms of his racial identity, Michael stated that he feels a stronger connection with the White side of his racial background, having been raised by his White mother; he also believes that the way he talks and acts could better be described as White rather than Black. He sometimes passes for White with a “nice tan,” though he is also frequently asked, “What are you,” “What are you mixed with,” and “Is your mom White?” Others have presumed him to be Mexican from time to time. He has many White friends and prefers to date White women, but also noted that he does have friends of color, and that he sees issues of crime and poverty common to Black communities as larger social problems that are not necessarily the fault of individuals trapped in grim circumstances. In fact, he said the following about one of his texts when I asked him what it said about him as a person: “I think I tried to bring light to this Black thing, like I brought in drugs, family conditions, the victims of the correctional systems. And poverty.” The writing sample, an outline about causes for crime, mirrored the aforementioned views Michael spoke of when he talked about problems facing impoverished Black communities. It is interesting, then, that Michael did not specifically mention race in the outline—this absence of race reflects the selectivity with which Michael writes about his own racial identity (always excluded in academic spaces, at least in the texts he shared with me) and race in general—this assignment, in his own words, brought light to racial inequity, yet, race was not mentioned in the writing itself.

For Michael, the answer to the question of “if” when it comes to disclosing racial identity is consistently no; he further demonstrates selectivity in his decisions to explicitly write about race or to exclude race from his writing, even when he sees the topic at hand as being related to race.

The question of “when”: “It doesn’t matter who I am.” If racial identity is to be portrayed in writing, when do participants decide to do so? The following discussion addresses the aspect of selectivity in showcasing the contexts in which students chose to reveal their multiraciality or other components of their racial identities, exploring the question of “when” students chose to engage in identity work either through this manner, or by writing about race without directly referencing their own identities in their compositions.

In the classroom: “Staying true to myself but still trying to be MLA.” When participants described themselves in relationship to the writing that they were doing in the classroom, six students clearly stood out as having obviously engaged in identity work through their writing: Leila, Taylor, Emma, Kya, Armona and Gabby. Leila and Taylor’s intentional identity work in the classroom space will be discussed at length in examining the theme of overt racial identity work in composing practices. Gabby’s case also answers the “when” question, with one answer being in school. However, because she is particularly selective regarding which aspects of her racial identity she portrays in her academic writing, I examine her coursework writing in the “which” section of selectivity. In looking at the “when” aspect of selectivity, Kya, Emma and Armona’s writing show different versions of the same answer to the question of “when.” At a surface level, all three women can be said to be exercising selectivity in that their

response to “when” to write about race is, simply, in formal academic writing. Kya and Emma’s identity work, though, clearly presents who they are as women of color in their writing in this context. Armona’s “when,” on the other hand, circles back to the question of “if”—while Armona does not choose to reveal her racial identity through writing, she does suggest that her thinking about her own racial identity evolved throughout her composing practices; thus, she also engages in identity work, “when” she engages in formal academic writing in the classroom.

Kya’s strong identification with the Black aspects of her racial identity (her dominant racial heritage) come through in much of the writing that she does in and out of the classroom. Yet Kya is a particularly interesting case to examine in looking at when participants chose to express racial identities through writing for school because she has faced rejection of aspects of her writing in formal educational contexts, especially in an assignment that she saw as very related to her racial identity.

Kya engages in identity work in complex ways as she negotiates who she wants to be versus who she feels she needs to be in a variety of composing contexts. Much of her writing both in and out of the classroom is raced--sometimes she uses writing as a way to specifically explore or express aspects of her racial identity. One memorable experience at Somerco featured her first major essay for her English 101 class, an endeavor in which she excitedly analyzed the way an advertisement by Bic pens sent potentially destructive messages to women, particularly women of color. The ad Kya selected featured a professionally dressed, fantastically beautiful Black woman with long, flowing hair that appears to have been relaxed; the model is positioned next to an overwhelming list of demands required to succeed in the business world. Though Kya exhibited skill in vivid

language and keen insight in dissecting the ad's derogatory messages to women, particularly Black women, through methodically exploring the rhetorical choices, visual elements, and emotional appeals of this ad, she was disheartened when her English teacher awarded her only a 68% on the assignment, citing frequent grammatical errors and a lack of transitions as the main justifications for this score. Kya's identity as a Black woman came through quite clearly as she boldly dissected the ad, proclaiming, "As if black girls haven't had it bad enough, first we just started being in magazines and now when we do see people who look like us it is followed by checklist on how you have to act look and think in order to hold this position." Furthermore, she playfully inserts her feminine identity into the text when she rejected Bic's claim that successful women should "Look like a girl," arguing, "I'm sorry but we all have to age, am I right," a query her teacher physically rejects by using a red pen to cross out both first-person pronoun references in that specific line.

Nevertheless, Kya persists. She spoke at length in her interview about negotiating between her passions and interests as a writer and the persona that she is expected to display in 12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced font for her English 101 submissions. In an interview discussing a subsequent English 101 essay assignment, when asked what she wanted her teacher to understand about Kya when she read the text, Kya replied,

I hope she understands that I'm trying to come to an even ground with what she wants from me and what I expect from myself. Like staying true to myself but still trying to be MLA... And follow the format and follow what she wants me to portray my papers. So I hope she understands that I'm trying. And, I'm trying to meet her halfway on my writing. I hope she understands that I'm trying to come to an even ground with what she wants from me and what I expect from myself.

Thus, for Kya, selectivity is exercised in relation to “when” as she strives to strike a balance between who she is and who she feels she needs to be in her writing to earn an acceptable grade. She chose to write about a topic that was inseparable from her racial identity, and in doing so, she opted to insert herself as a Black woman into her own analysis regarding the Bic pen advertisement. Upon receiving the low grade, Kya wrote a new version of herself when she attempted her next assignment—one that while maintaining alignment with Kya’s sense of self and her passion for writing, less explicitly included her racial identity and made a greater attempt to conform to grammatical conventions and MLA formatting, aspects of writing that Kya sees as unrelated to who she is as a person.

Emma also answers the question of “when” with a yes, as she explores racialized issues in formal academic contexts; examples of work she shared with me to evidence this included a reading reaction she wrote in response to a 2005 article on lingering racial segregation and two works that explored beauty standards, both of which included critiques of these standards’ impact on women of color: an argumentative essay that declared that the advertising industry should refrain from subjecting Americans to only certain images of beauty, and a PowerPoint presentation that made the same argument. Emma went as far to insert herself into the conclusion of the PowerPoint, communicating that “People such as myself have had to question their relevance to a potentially beneficial society due to the glorification of something unimportant, fake, and nearly uncontrollable, being the importance of adherence to beauty standards.” This was the climax of a formal academic argument that skillfully illuminated the inherent problems with our media glorifying White, largely unattainable standards of beauty: “the

blonde, skinny thing,” Emma noted in an interview. Emma engages in identity work in this assignment by unabashedly claiming the identity of a woman who does not fit such standards; her use of the first-person appears only at the end of the argument, mirroring genre conventions that mandate that personal experiences are not typically included throughout the body of the work. Nevertheless, Emma didn’t view this assignment as even remotely integral to her embracing her racial identity as compared to the identity work she engages in through writing poetry in her journal, which will be discussed in detail under the overt engagement theme. Asked why she wrote her poetry, Emma responded that, “I just needed to write, and it came out,” suggesting that Emma’s development of a positive racial identity was facilitated through her writing practices. When asked about the writing that she did for Kensington, she replied, “I just wanted to get it done.” Thus, Emma’s identity work in formal educational contexts seems designed to proclaim her racial identity “when” she feels it is necessary or beneficial to do so; by contrast, the overt identity work that will be described through an examination of her poetry is more exploratory in nature, and more meaningful to Emma in her personal racial identity journey.

Unlike Kya and Emma’s texts, KU student Armona’s formal academic writing never indicates her own racial identity but it does address race. Despite her omission of her personal racial identity in her writing, the identity work she seemed to be doing beyond the page in terms of thinking about herself as a person of color was particularly significant. Armona demonstrates another aspect of the question of “when”—when is it appropriate to write about race and engage in identity work without specifically mentioning one’s own race in the writing? Examining Armona’s writing in a research

paper about modern racial discrimination and a related assignment, her comments from her interviews about what her writing says about her, and the absence of references to her own racial identity in the texts themselves portray a fascinating answer to the “when” question involved as participants explicitly insert themselves, or not, into texts that are very related to their lives.

While Kya described growing up in a dysfunctional home and experiencing disappointment with the ways she saw the school system failing children such as herself, and Emma discussed growing up in poverty, Armona grew up excelling at school, having been raised by her married parents who are both teachers. Two of the assignments she shared with me for her Business Honors English Class explored racism: an annotated bibliography reviewing research on modern racial discrimination in the workplace and a lengthy argumentative essay that used those same sources reviewed in the earlier assignment to demonstrate the depths of the problem and argue for policy reformation.

When asked what her argumentative essay says about her, Armona replied, “It says that I think racial discrimination is a problem. I think that it’s still present and it’s a serious issue that’s affecting not only minorities, but all of America.” This is a bit of a contrast from views Armona expressed just a few weeks earlier, when she acknowledged that racism probably existed, but that, coming from a diverse, inclusive community in New England,

we didn’t believe that people still thought that way, like it was such a thing for us in the past, we learned about it in history class, or you just hear about it, but you don’t think that it’s actually real, ‘cause for us, that’s not real.

Still, Armona self-selected a topic dealing with racial controversy, and she reported that she enjoyed being allowed to choose her topic. Some of the research that

Armona found suggested that since the Civil Rights Act Reformation in 1991, many employers have been less likely to hire people of color in fear of potential lawsuits down the road. In her second interview, when I asked her about her research problem being related to her own life, Armona discussed the ways in which the reformation actually resulted in exactly the opposite effect from its intended purpose. Her description of this problem may demonstrate evolution in her thinking about herself as a person of color: In an earlier interview, when I asked her if she had a personal reason for selecting this topic, she responded with “I don’t think so.”

Armona’s essay is a plea for Americans to address racial discrimination in the workforce. Her identity as a person of color seeking to succeed in the business world seems inseparable from her viewpoint regarding her topic; though, as Armona pointed out herself when discussing the annotated bibliography that served as a prequel for this assignment, White students writing on the same topic would, hopefully, voice the same views Armona does. Throughout our interviews, though, Armona seemed to be further exploring the connection between this paper and her own life, noting that as her instructor continued to push her through drafting and revising, they discussed the importance of the topic. When asked if the research she’s read on modern discrimination causes her worry for the future when she will be on the job market, she shared that though she comes from a very diverse, inclusive community, some of the traveling that she did with a competitive softball team to different geographic regions exposed her to troubling beliefs held by others. She stated,

for travel softball, like learning, and hearing people say stuff, who are from, even the other side of the state or a different state, and you’re like, what? Like, do you actually think that? So, like, for that I guess, just taking off the rose-colored glasses, per se, um, yeah , it’s just I... well, I don’t really think it is and I hope it

never is; I'm like, starting to figure out it might be.... Like, I hope it's not an issue, but, who knows? I guess.

By the end of our time together, Armona was using language that suggested that she more strongly felt the urgency of the implications she discovered through writing her research paper, perhaps in a more personal way. When asked what her paper communicates to her audience about herself, Armona identified herself as an activist and a leader. In both her speech and her writing, Armona voiced a need for change; she even stated that she feels the research essay depicts her as someone who could initiate such change, and she asserts, “this should be a priority for all people.”

Armona’s beliefs regarding what her writing says about her are thoughtful and reasonable, but her own racial identity is noticeably absent in the writing itself. There are a few first-person references in Armona’s paper, and plenty of them in the annotated bibliography, but none of them proclaim her identity as a person of color or a biracial individual. This was an argument based on research, so perhaps Armona felt that including personal information about herself would not have been valued in this mode of writing. Another point to consider, though, is how strong of a writer and a student that Armona is, qualities which, in the past, have been grounds for accusations that she acts White (other offenses include how she talks, how she dresses, and her choice of –mostly White—friends). Armona seemed to resent the implication that people of color can’t or shouldn’t succeed in school, or speak or dress in certain ways. “I just think I don’t talk stupid,” she commented, when explaining that she is known to “talk White.” Knowing that her success in school is often associated with Whiteness, it begs the question, does Armona choose not to reveal her identity as a person of color because she has mastered the genre of MAE, an accomplishment often associated with being White? Armona has

noted that she and her roommate, who is also biracial, are the only two people of color in this particular Honors class. The exclusion of Armona's own racial identity in her academic writing is similar to Brandee's case in that both young women are fluent speakers and writers of MAE; both have demonstrated success in educational contexts where they have been accustomed to being one of a few people of color in a classroom. These two participants, who both talked at length in their interviews about their use of language, have both articulated a clear belief that their language usage is associated with their successes.

Thus, the absence of Armona's own racial identity in her research argument might be ironic, considering the topic of her paper, or it might be a very smart rhetorical move that conforms with unstated expectations of the genre in which she is writing. Whatever the reason for Armona's selectivity in excluding her racial identity from the content of her essay, and regardless of how deliberately that choice was made, Armona's final draft remains an evocative piece of writing that convincingly shows that modern racism still exists, that it must be addressed, and that America will continue to be crippled by inattention to this problem so long as we continue to ignore it.

Social media contexts: “Who wants to argue with someone on Twitter? On Facebook?” vs. “I can convey the severity of what I feel.” As six participants found space inside formal educational contexts to engage in racial identity work through writing, other participants either opted not to, or they were not afforded opportunities to do so. While students engaged in a varied spectrum of composing practices in formal educational contexts, all of them described participating in social media activities when discussing their writing outside of the classroom. In relation to the question of “when,”

most participants tended to agree that social media was a pretty terrible format for engaging in writing related to racial identity. Five participants—David, Kya, Michael, Armona and Brandee—indicated that their typical composing practices outside of formal educational contexts do not include writing about race on social media or for other audiences. Armona mentioned staying away from controversial topics online as a general rule. Gabby made a similar statement, but some data did indicate that she may not always stick to her principle of avoiding racial controversy in online discussions. In particular, Gabby shared a music video by Joyner Lucas to her Facebook feed, telling me that she encouraged her friends to “sit here and like listen to this video, cuz it says some really good things.” In her own words, Gabby described the video as

like a rap, and um, and it was this White guy, like, the typical big White guy, beard and all, that was a Trump supporter, and then there was a Black guy, dreads and so forth, and they were like going back and forth about, just race.

Gabby went on to note that both “have good points,” before venturing that she found herself more in agreement with the “White” perspective—the premise of the video includes two actors who verbalize the sorts of often unspoken frustrations Black and White racial groups are thought to hold regarding each other. In the video, the actors are seated across from one another, addressing each other as they lip sync along with the rap artist, who is not pictured in the video. Gabby felt that the argument “if you don’t want someone else to say [the “N” word], then why is it ok for you to say it?” was convincing. Still, she mentioned that she often stays out of racial debates online, in part because of her ambitions to work in law enforcement, and her recognition that those sorts of posts might be used against her in the future.

Furthermore, Gabby is reluctant to write about race online for fear of ruining relationships. She states, “I try *not* to get into it as much on social media, because, a lot of... it’s ended a lot of friendships and a lot of acquaintances, because some people get really offended by it.” David, Kya, Michael and Brandee seem to recognize this, too; they have all expressed a belief that their audiences will not modify opinions regarding racial matters. Michael says that chiming in online regarding racial debates is often pointless because arguing over opinions is not likely to lead anywhere productive. Brandee agrees that these written exchanges are often fruitless, asking, “Who wants to argue with someone on Twitter? On Facebook?” Leila echoes this sentiment, claiming, “I don’t see progress, ever. It’s like talking to a brick wall.”

Despite her belief that progress is unlikely, Leila pushes forward with using social media platforms to write about racial controversy. She notes that,

It... makes me scared because I have brothers. They are Black. They are Black men. So like, at any point, they could be [*snaps her fingers*] taken away from me, you know? Like, and they’re young. So it’s just, I feel like if we don’t make progress now, it’s only going to be worse. You know?

Leila’s fears regarding how the world sees her brothers motivate her to continue to project herself as a warrior for racial justice in frequent online writing practices. She reflects: “I feel very strongly about it. So I feel like I really, really need to like...put intense thought into that, so I can convey the severity of what I feel.” Thus, Leila does not shy away from writing about racialized topics, though she has been known to delete a Tweet (“Tweet & Delete,” she calls it), if she feels she went overboard in a reaction. Her multiracial identity may come through less obviously online than does her identification as a woman of color. Her descriptions of the writing that she does about race online have included mostly her outrage at racial injustice and are the sorts of posts that might be

expected from people concerned with racial inequity, regardless of the writers' particular ethnic backgrounds. If her multiraciality is not evident in the self she projects online, it is still apparent in her thinking as she navigates these contexts. She said the following to me, when I asked her how the attention race has been receiving nationwide impacts the way she thinks about herself:

Leila: It... it makes, that's the part that confuses you, and kinda like, pulling you in one way or the other, you know? 'Cause the only options they give you are, like, just separate. You know? So like, it's either, you believe in this, or you don't. It's, you're with us or against us. You know? But I don't necessarily feel that way. So it kinda just puts me in like, in like a bind here.

Jenny: And do you feel that is specifically because you have a multiracial identity?

Leila: Well, yeah. 'Cause that's, you know, it's who like, I am. I couldn't just forget that. I couldn't just wake up tomorrow and say I don't feel, you know, I don't feel like being this, so I'ma go be with this group. Right, like, no. So it's, so actually, a good point like that is that like, uh, my dad's dad, that's the Black side, and like um, his, my grandfather's sisters, don't really, like me. And they treat me like, differently. Because, like, I have white skin. And I have, like, long hair. And I've had long hair. And they have this, like, preconceived notion that I think that I'm better, but that's really not the case. Like I, you know, I never asked to be the way I am.

As Leila continues to grapple with her multiraciality in the racially divisive online contexts she writes in, she nevertheless uses her composing practices to challenge racial inequities, projecting her own identity as a person of color to the audience that reads her texts. For Leila, when it comes to the question of "when" to engage in racial identity work through composing, her writing practices indicate that the answer is frequently.

Beyond school walls & evolution in "when": "What if I shared my view?"

Beyond social media platforms, participants also demonstrated selectivity in deciding when to write about or explore racial identities in other modes of composing undertaken

in non-formal educational contexts. Emma writes frequently about race in her journal, mostly through poetry. Kya participates in freestyling with her fiancé, an activity she describes as very related to her racial identity; like Emma, she also enjoys writing poetry.

Kya's moving poetry is one mode in which Kya does not censor herself, though she does not typically share her work with anyone other than her fiancé. In this context, she writes freely about the anxiety that she feels as a woman of color, fearful that because her Black fiancé

...doesn't always smile when he says good morning, that someone will be threaten. Someone will call the police; someone will lie on him because its easier that way. Someone will hate him for him being in his natural state...

She writes here and in other contexts about her deep desire to succeed in getting an education, in securing a better life for herself and her future family. Another line from the same poem reads, “And what can I do nothing. Not without an education, not without/ money. I work hard to stop this cycle for my family.” Though her poem seemed especially powerful in terms of helping someone outside the situation realize Kya’s fears regarding the way a racist society perceives her fiancé, Kya did not agree when I suggested that her writing may be influential enough to inspire others to change. Thus, though she writes frequently about her racial identity and closely related matters, she did not, in the beginning of the study, use writing in any context other than school to communicate her racial identity to an audience outside of her home.

However, Kya demonstrated evolution in her thinking about “when” to use composing practices to engage in identity work related to race, and in “when” to share those compositions. In her first interview, she noted that she keeps her opinions regarding racial controversy to herself when it comes to sharing views on social

media. By the conclusion of the study, Kya had begun periodically posting about police brutality against Black men and other issues of racial injustice, a practice she had previously refrained from due to her professional work in a setting with older White women, many of whom she knew to hold conservative views. Throughout her time in the study, Kya described thinking about our conversation, and noted that she asked herself, “What if I shared my view?”

The question of “which”: “I belong to the African-American race because of my parents’ upbringing.” Participants also exercised the option to focus on certain aspects of their racial identities above others in their composing practices; these aspects of “which” varied according to context and purpose. As discussed previously, David mentions “reserving” his Hispanic heritage for written situations in which he believes being biracial will afford him credibility he otherwise may not receive from his audience, and Taylor found herself defending her Blackness in one context and her Hispanic roots in another. Gabby provides another captivating look at the “which” component of revealing aspects of racial identity through composing practices. A fascinating individual who has a Black father and a multiracial mother (who Gabby also described only as “White,” from time to time), Gabby has a unique claim to Whiteness through albinism. She was born with such a White appearance, her parents changed their minds about what to name her upon meeting her—Gabby’s actual name was inspired by her parents’ first impression of her pale skin and blonde hair. Gabby contributed less data to this study than did the other participants, as she completed only one interview and shared fewer writing samples. Nevertheless, the writing that she did share shows that she often engages in identity work, including racial identity in work, both in and out of formal

educational contexts—her writing for formal educational contexts is discussed here, as these writing samples portray a complex consideration of the question of “which.”

The two texts Gabby opted to share that she’d written for a Somerco course were both assignments for Sociology 101. They were particularly personal and informative pieces; Gabby describes the first one by saying it “was basically just like who I was as a person.” Thus, her opportunity for identity work is obvious: Gabby was tasked with explaining her “self-concept” through a reflective writing activity. Gabby included aspects of her racial identity within this assignment, writing, “Society says that I wouldn’t graduate high school without a kid because I’m still a young African American woman who lived in the poor areas growing up even though I’m albino.” Here, she explores the notion of who the world says she is—what she perceives is expected from her based on factors such as her race and socioeconomic status. Gabby describes hardships that might have contributed to the undesirable outcome of teen pregnancy, noting that her mother was addicted to drugs and her father was constantly away from home for work in his effort to provide for Gabby and three other siblings. But, Gabby writes, “I didn’t carry myself by my story”—rather, she attended school regularly, earned respectable grades in the classroom and respect on athletic fields, and avoided the unwanted pregnancy she felt was stereotypically expected of her given her age, race, and socioeconomic status.

In eluding the negative stereotypes Gabby recognizes as societal norms for girls of color living in poverty, Gabby uses writing to position herself as someone who has risen above what society says is expected of her as a Black girl--but in that same sentence in which she identifies herself as a “young African American woman who lived in the

poor areas," she does hint at the privilege her albinism affords her, adding "even though I'm albino." Gabby's words reflect a fascinating negotiation of identity, since for many, a visually discernible genetic disorder may typically serve as a detriment to the way in which others perceive the affected individuals. In Gabby's case, the lack of pigmentation resulting from her albinism perhaps entitles her to a valuable benefit in society that she otherwise would almost certainly not have been granted: White privilege.

Of course, growing up albino also presented Gabby with challenges she otherwise would not have faced; she uses writing to express one of them in the same essay:

I was the kid who got bullied growing up because I was "different". I wasn't much different from the other kids. I put my socks on first? Does that make me different? I wanted my ice cream before dinner but you know, the parents weren't having that. The only difference I had where [sic] my parents and siblings were black or "light skin" and I was "really light skin" or white.

This writing allows Gabby an opportunity to problematize superficial notions of differences, as she lists her "different" skin tone as no more significant to who she is than a preference to get dressed in the morning by first putting on her socks, or her desire to eat dessert before dinner. With this rhetorical technique, Gabby disrupts the conception of differences in skin tone as important, acknowledging that she is racially and physically "different," but qualifying those differences by her use of questions for her readers, provoking us to consider difference as a problematic construct.

Another interesting way Gabby uses writing to present herself to her audience in terms of race is with the labels that she uses to describe herself. From the examples listed above, we can see that she uses the terms "African American," "really light skin," and "white." In a second sample of her writing from the same class, Gabby once again uses the term African-American, writing, "I belong to the African-America race because of

my parent's upbringing." However, in her interview, Gabby describes her father as "African-American and my mom is, she has African-American in her, but she's mixed with like Caucasian, German, and Native American." Given her "white" skin and her mother's multiracial background, it may be surprising that "African-American" was Gabby's term of choice to use when introducing her own racial background in the first paragraph of a worldview essay. In her interview, though, Gabby spoke at length about how close she is with her father, and how she has no relationship with her mother.

In light of Gabby's contextualizing her family relationships, her racial self-identification through writing might be better understood, but two other comments she made in her interview once again serve as points of interest. First, in describing a video she watched of Meghan Markle discussing what it was like growing up biracial but being given only monoracial options for identifying herself, Gabby declared that,

now it's, they don't, they don't just say choose one; choose any that apply. And I feel like that's important, because you can't just choose one thing... you can't just be like, oh, I'm just Black, knowing that like you're--you have more to you.

The second remark Gabby made that seemed to contrast with the way she chose to represent her race in writing through the samples she shared with me depicted her as identifying more strongly with the White aspects of her heritage: "I would say that I would lean more towards the Caucasian side, because that's like, where I feel comfortable." She did, however, go on to say that if she were to claim that she was only White, she would be letting her father down.

Thus, Gabby uses writing to present certain aspects of her racial identity to her audience, in slightly different ways in the two samples she shared with me, even in the same course context. Neither essay mentions being multiracial, but the first one did

discuss Gabby's skin tone, albinism, and African-American heritage, and in the paragraph that discusses the bullying she endured for her skin color not matching that of her parents and siblings, she writes the following:

There's not much about me that I would change. I'm a very faith oriented person and I believe God made me who He wanted me to be. So, to change something He created then I don't think it's meant to be.

She goes on to describe herself as equipped to speak up for other victims of bullying as a result of the mistreatment she has endured. Here, Gabby proudly writes herself as an overcomer while she simultaneously blurs racial categorization by describing herself as "African American," "very light skinned," and "white" in the same essay.

In another essay, Gabby does not allude to her appearance in terms of skin tone when she discusses race. Perhaps she feels it is unnecessary to discuss her Whiteness; she is, after all, commonly assumed to be White. Perhaps she felt that her previous description of her race and her skin tone had left enough of an impression on her teacher that they did not need to be revisited. Perhaps she keeps the focus on her Blackness out of respect for her Black father, who she also discusses in that same essay, three paragraphs later: "Family is who you live with. My family is my father. I have no contact with my mother." Regardless of her reason for not identifying with all aspects of her multiraciality, Gabby demonstrates agency in choosing to express only select aspects of her racial heritage. Her positioning herself solely as connecting with her father's heritage may be a response to the many experiences throughout her life that have demanded she explain her skin color. She states in her interview,

Being younger, I get like, treated differently, because I come from a different background, and I was albino, so I'd be like, yeah, that's my brother and sister, and they'd be like, no they're not, they're Black, like, you're not, they're not your siblings. So I got teased a lot when I was younger, and it kinda like gave me the

tough skin that I have now, so it's like, it, I don't really wear it on my shoulders like I used to. So I think that has a lot to do with how I am now.

Her metaphoric use of the phrase “tough skin” in the above quote has quite a literal meaning, as Gabby’s fair skin has been a defining aspect of the way others have seen her throughout her entire life. Perhaps her assertion of her father’s racial identity as her own through her worldview essays are reflective of Gabby’s discovering an uncontested space in which she can racially describe herself however she sees fit, without worry that her claim will be disputed. Regardless of her reason for doing so, Gabby clearly exercises selectivity in choosing “which” aspects of her multiracial identity to describe and explore through her writing for school.

Selectivity across campus contexts.

Somerco. The three participants from Somerco Community College— Kya, Michael, and Gabby— all indicated that Somerco was an accepting and diverse campus. None felt that they had experienced racism from peers or instructors on campus, and all exercised selectivity in the writing that they did on campus: Michael opted not to write about his own race in any of the writing he shared with me; he also reported not doing so in any other assignments he’d completed since enrolling in college. He did, however, select racial topics quite frequently in the assignments he was required to submit for his English classes. As previously discussed, Gabby wrote about her own racial identity in her sociology class. In the two assignments she shared with me, she exercised selectivity in choosing to disclose herself as “African-American” in her writings, even though she often passes for White and also describes identifying as multiracial. Kya also exercised selectivity in her choice of topics, selecting matters that seemed important to her dominant Black racial identity, and she included references to herself in one essay as she

saw them related to the topic at hand (media messages to Black women). When she received a low grade on that assignment, notably, Kya kept race out of her next essay, even though she mentioned in her interview that she did see that topic, embracing her body through a lifestyle she described as “plus-sized enthusiast,” as being related to her racial identity. In spite of these students all voicing a belief that Somerco is a diverse and inclusive campus, Kya’s comments on the sort of person she felt she was expected to be here in writing are particularly striking. Kya spoke of her desire for validation from her instructor, confiding,

Now I didn’t expect an A. I didn’t expect an A, but I just, I just, even if she would’ve wrote, these are some really great ideas, it would’ve made me feel a little better. Ok, my grammar sucks, got it, didn’t sound the best, got it, but my idea was great.

Kya’s writing, even when she has conferred with her teacher and sought help in other academic spaces, typically does contain some standard English grammatical errors and/or phrases typical of AAE, and Kya readily acknowledges that some of her work “doesn’t sound like a college student wrote it.” She has reflected on the way she spoke growing up, and how she felt her White peers were at an advantage; she has longingly noted that she wished her vocabulary was more developed. Still, she feels Somerco teachers are fair and students are welcoming of others from diverse backgrounds, but she did offer the following comments that, while not necessarily related to race, are deserving of attention. When asked which ways she represents who she is to her instructors and classmates, she replied, “I kinda abandoned representing who I was to my instructor, my classmates.” When asked why, her response was simply, “Because I know that being who I am won’t get me a good grade.” She went on to elaborate that, “I know that I have to be who they want me to be in order to pass English, to pass math, it doesn’t matter who I am at this

point.” Such a claim is certainly disheartening for instructors who care about their students’ identities both in and outside of classroom contexts.

Equally disconcerting, Kya went on to proclaim that instructors don’t really like diversity, but she did clarify that she meant diversity in terms of original ideas, as opposed to race, culture, etc. Still, it is clear that Kya’s strong connection to her racial identity, has not, in the written and anecdotal data she provided, been validated in the writing that she completed for English class. According to Kya, the assignment that was blatantly related to race, while it failed to earn her the grade she desired, “made me feel like I had a voice.”

Kensington. While Somerco participants shared similar experiences in discussing their overall perceptions of the formal academic context in which they were writing, Kensington students’ selective engagement in racial identity work was impacted by the radically diverse ways they experience their campus, as they come from such different backgrounds. The three participants from Kensington, the PWI, were David (Hispanic/White), Armona (Black/White (Portuguese)), and Emma (Black, believes herself to be multiracial, uncertain of other racial heritages). It would have been difficult to find three people across campus who had less in common with each other than did these three participants: David frequently passes for White, Armona typically identifies herself as Black—even though she considers her Portuguese heritage to be very important to who she is—and Emma, who was mostly raised by her Black mother, frequently questions her racial identity through writing, just as she questions the racial stereotypes around her. David and Armona are devout Christians; Emma also writes about her spiritual beliefs but debunks the notion that as a Black woman, she must “listen to

Gospel,” lest she not be a Christian; she also writes some fairly risqué poetry that would probably cause the other participants to blush. Armona is a double major, an honors student, and a gifted softball player; David’s schedule is full with being apprenticed into the ministry at his church, and serving in a leadership role in a Christian club, which he also represents through his involvement in SGA; and Emma, despite loving to read and write, mentions that she thinks she might come off as lazy to her instructors, and perhaps gives the impression that she is unsocial to her peers. David is from the immediate geographic area in which Kensington is situated, Emma moved around a lot within the region before her mother relocated to a neighboring county about an hour’s drive from the campus, and Armona’s family lives in New England. The KU students’ ages also span the study’s eligibility requirements: Armona, 18, is one of the two youngest participants, Emma is also toward the young end at 19, and David is the second oldest at 24.

All of this to say that while no student throughout the study seems to have had an experience “typical,” of the other two participants from the same institution, David, Armona, and Emma’s very different life experiences and obvious diversities have certainly impacted the ways they experience Kensington. David, who was homeschooled, commented in his first interview that he was bewildered when he witnessed what he described as other students’ extreme reactions to perceived racial microaggressions present on campus through the presidential elections of 2016. Armona, who came from a community known for their inclusivity and diversity, has been shocked to hear of some of the experiences her roommate, also biracial, has shared with her about her life—Armona also noted that she is one of only two people of color in her Honors

English class, and the only person of color on her softball team. Emma told of a time that a White male student walked into a common area where Emma and a few other Black female friends were watching TV—without addressing the women, he changed the channel. Thus, the ways that these participants feel their own racial identities are significant or not on campus seem to depend very much on what their particular racial identities are, and how they feel that they are perceived by others. This, of course, impacts the selectivity they exercise when engaging in racial identity work through their composing practices.

Of the academic writing that they shared with me, both Armona and Emma addressed race through one or more assignments, and Emma wrote about her own racial identity (though not in the same deeply explorative manner as in her personal writing). Emma’s assignments, an essay and a PowerPoint, demonstrated sophisticated rhetorical choices—her writing exhibits a skill level that indicates that she would not have carelessly incorporated a first-person reference. Thus, her intentional use of the first-person as she wrote/spoke of being a woman of color who found herself marginalized by America’s unrealistic beauty standards was a testament to both her strong connection to a self-selected topic and the environment in which she was composing—having mentioned grading and expectations several times as we discussed her work for the course in question, Emma made it clear that she would not have written in a way that would have defied instructor expectations. Her inclusion of her own racial identity in these assignments, then, demonstrates that her professor created a context in which she felt that disclosing her personal racial identity through her composing practices would be appropriate and comfortable; furthermore, it would strengthen the argument she was

making by increasing her credibility and ability to appeal to her audience as someone who has suffered from not seeing women such as herself portrayed in positive or valued ways by the advertising industry.

As in the case of Emma and the Somerco students who were permitted to select their own topics in their writing courses, Armona was also afforded the opportunity to do so, and likewise, she received encouragement and validation from her honors instructor when she decided to write about racial discrimination in the workplace. Armona's final draft exemplified mastery of the researched argument genre. It was also apparent that even though Armona did not write about her own racial identity, she engaged in identity work both through her selection of a racialized topic and her personal growth throughout the writing process. In selecting a controversial racial topic, Armona positioned herself as a person who is willing and able to confront issues of racial inequity. Furthermore, over the course of her completing the assignment, Armona exhibited growth in the ways that she personally conceived racial injustice to be present in her own life and the world beyond her immediate surroundings. While Armona noted that she had begun questioning colorblind narratives prior to her admission to KU, as she found occasion to do so throughout Trump's ascension to political power during Armona's final years of high school, it seems that her research paper further illustrated her developing concern regarding racial controversies. Armona, by the end of our time together, described herself as an "activist."

Doing this type of identity work in a PWI seems important to both Armona and Emma's conceptions of how they fit in the (mostly White) world around them. Another point of interest to consider in relation to campus context here circles back to just how

marginalized multiracial individuals are: It is so common to presume monoracial affiliation that, as David noted, multiracial student experiences are often received with confusion and resistance. David described discussing racial controversy with two well-meaning White faculty members who had approached David and a Black classmate on the heels of the Baltimore riots that erupted after Freddie Gray's death. In his recounting of the experience, David noted that his White appearance and the revealing of his biracial identity may have shaken the instructors' conceptions of what it means to be a student of color, and how this experience can vary widely across racial identities. David's selectivity in choosing to reveal his Latino heritage is a strategy that he sometimes "reserves" in order to increase his credibility as he voices views that he feels monoracial White individuals may be unfairly attacked for holding. This is especially interesting in terms of examining experiences across contexts: Here, David's selectivity in sharing his Hispanic identity, is, in his words, "a stamp of approval"—interestingly, Taylor's Hispanic heritage works exactly the opposite way at a historically Black campus.

University of Bay South. David's exercising of selectivity at KU demonstrates a conscious decision on his part to disrupt superficial notions of race. At the HBU, though, selectivity is sometimes a forced response: participants in this environment often faced demands to answer the question of "What are you?", but more than that, they were frequently coerced into having to justify their answers to the question. Taylor's case, which will be further analyzed in the discussions of the remaining two themes, is illustrative of a situation in which writing served as a forum for her to mediate her classmates' judgments and her own assertions of her right to identify as Black, regardless of her other racial identities or political stances. The overt racial identity work demanded

of Taylor will be discussed shortly, but by means of an introduction, the campus context for which Taylor was writing was that of an online discussion thread required for a media ethics course. In an interview, Taylor described experiencing an insulting dismissiveness of her own contributions to a racially charged discussion—monoracial Black classmates claimed that she had no right to share her opinions due to her biracial identity. Taylor’s recounting of the experience noted that she responded in writing, selectively defending the legitimacy of her Blackness.

The other two UBS participants, Leila and Brandee, also exercised selectivity. Brandee’s answer to the question of “if” is frequently a no—she exercises selectivity in opting not to bring her own racial identity into the writing assignments she completes, at least those she shared with me. This may be reflective of her campus context, because Brandee mainly identifies with the Black aspects of her racial identity, and though she occasionally gets the “What are you?” question—she describes her eyes as “chinky,” and notes that classmates will use this as a basis to ask her about her race—she is also frequently (and in her mind, correctly) accepted for Black by her classmates. Interview data indicate that Brandee has achieved a strongly positive sense of Black identity; even as she uses terms with sometimes derogatory associations (i.e., “chinky” eyes, “kinky” hair) to describe her physical features. She stated, “People wanna have my skin color, or people wanna have my kinky, coily hair.” Her use of descriptions that some might find offensive seem to actually demonstrate pride in her ethnic heritage, as she noted that “I come from a lot of things that people want to have...they try to be like people of color.” Being a Black student at an HBU, Brandee is less often required to navigate questions of her racial identity than are the other two participants at this research site, who both appear

“more” multiracial—or, conversely, less Black—than Brandee, and identify more strongly with multiple aspects of their heritages.

Another interesting phenomenon present in Brandee’s case, though, is the idea of White identity, a surprising exploration, since Brandee’s skin tone does not suggest Whiteness. Nor does Brandee identify as White: her mother, who raised her, is Black, and her father, who she does not have a relationship with, is Black and Asian. Yet, Brandee noted that she attended many predominantly White schools throughout lower grade levels, and because of that, she writes and talks in ways that are sometimes considered White. In this sense, Brandee faces a challenge similar to the one Taylor encounters: Legitimizing her claims to Blackness. This seems easier to accomplish for Brandee than it was for Taylor: Not only does she appear “more” Black than Taylor, Brandee’s speech patterns, while sometimes grounds for her peers to question her, are reflective of the sorts of speaking she will need to do in her intended career in law. She also doesn’t hold the conservative views that Taylor does, and is, therefore, more likely to be perceived by her classmates as a woman whose adoption of the culture of power has less to do with a rejection of Blackness and more to do with recognizing the path to success. Unlike Taylor, whose lighter skin and smoother hair coupled with her frequent and vocal support of colorblind ideologies lead to the questioning of her Blackness by many peers, Brandee’s curlier hair style, darker skin, and quest to become a defense attorney with a desire to protect people of color unfairly punished by the legal system result in a sort of pass. It seems as though she is afforded an allowance from her peers to adhere to White cultural norms similar to those for which Taylor’s motives are often questioned. Brandee’s peers seem more willing than Taylor’s to overlook her adoption of

MAE and her participation in the normative Whiteness of curricular expectations, perhaps because she so clearly comes across as a proud Black woman. Thus, Brandee's multiraciality is minimized, whereas Taylor's is scrutinized.

Of the three UBS participants, Leila's selectivity most often included her desire to proclaim and affirm her multiracial identity. This was evident in her choice to write about her exploration and ultimate embracement of her multiraciality—she was not, like Taylor, cornered into defending her racial identity, and she does not, like Brandee, blend in with the crowd and thus have the option (luxury?) of avoiding the race question. Rather, Leila opts to write about this aspect of her life because she is passionate about who she is. Leila's case will be discussed further in the discussion of the next two themes, but it is worth noting here that her campus context has a major impact on the selectivity she demonstrates when she often engages in racial identity work through composing practices.

Leila's skin tone is extremely fair; she describes her racial heritage as Black, Guamanian, and Korean, but at UBS, she is sometimes presumed to be White. Leila has commented that being on a campus surrounded by people who are likely to notice and question her light skin has elicited more conversations about her racial identity than she feels she would encounter had she decided to attend a PWI. Crediting UBS with facilitating her personal growth in her racial identity journey, Leila's arrival in proclaiming a healthy multiracial identity seems to have been expedited by her campus context. Her progressive identity work was accomplished in part through writing and the sharing of writing; it was also shaped in additional ways by her college environment. Leila noted that her identity as a high-achieving student and a friendly and approachable

person have contributed to the positive sense of identity she has continued to develop during her time at UBS. Though she feels that inaccurate perceptions of her “Whiteness” may create a negative first impression with some of her classmates, Leila uses writing and other classroom interactions as a way to break down barriers between herself and others. She may have encountered fewer barriers had she chosen a school where the focus was less on race, where people of color who may pass as White blend in more easily with the majority of the student population—but Leila has seen the opportunity to frequently discuss and write about her multiracial identity as beneficial to her ongoing racial identity growth, and she notes that this escalation in development would likely not have occurred had she not pursued her education at an HBU. A more detailed examination of Leila’s experiences follows, as do explorations of other cases that demonstrate overt racial identity work.

Overt Racial Identity Work

All nine cases clearly featured overt and intentional examples of participants engaging in identity work of some sort. Participants clearly authored compositions that expressed who they were in terms of their religious beliefs, relationship statuses, enrollment in Honors classes, affinity for video games, senses of humor, feminism, love of writing, and much, much, more. As far as they exercised selectivity in writing about racial identity or racial topics as discussed above, Kya, Gabby, Armona, and Emma also demonstrated overtness as they engaged in racial identity work. However, three participants clearly used composing practices to overtly navigate racial identity work through questioning, proclaiming, or exploring racial identities. Leila’s case shows that writing about her own multiraciality in classrooms at UBS has served as an impetus for

her to question her racial identity, and her repeated writing on the same topic allows her to project different evolutions of herself as her understanding of her racial identity deepens. Also at UBS, both in and outside of formal educational contexts, Taylor negotiated her multiraciality through writing, defending her legitimacy to speak on Black issues to her monoracial peers in an online discussion thread and using social media to explain and defend her Hispanic heritage. While Leila and Taylor have tackled this navigation in the formal educational context, KU student Emma's personal poetry has allowed her just as ample of an opportunity to explore her own racial identity through writing. While Emma's selective use of her racial identity was previously explored as it pertains to her writing in an English course, her journal writing serves as an overt means for her to question both her own identity and the society in which she finds herself positioned to make identity choices.

Leila: “Damn, who am I?” When asked about her race, Leila rattles off a string of racial and ethnic labels “just like a tape recording”: half Black, 25% Guamanian, 25% Korean. Of all participants, Leila uses academic writing most overtly as a tool to consciously engage in identity work related to exploring and proclaiming her multiraciality. She brought four academic writing pieces to her two interviews: the first one was a reflection on her multiracial identity, which prompted her English instructor to reach out to Leila and suggest she contact me. Other academic writing samples Leila shared included an interview (with a biracial woman) considering how principles learned in Leila’s psychology class apply to her interviewee’s life, as well as two other assignments that were not directly related to race.

The piece on her own multiracial identity was written in response to a prompt that asked Leila to describe a time she felt ostracized. In this writing, Leila found an opportunity to describe the journey that has been her whole life in the making, as she wrote of learning to embrace her multiracial identity after years of “not truly knowing” where she fit in. In the sense that she shared this work with a real audience--both her teacher and a Black classmate, who, in Leila’s words, was “probably looking at me like, *oh, this White girl, she thinks she’s sooo smart*, or something like that, *she thinks she’s a better student than everyone here*, or something like that,” Leila engaged in identity work by using writing to be honest about her racial insecurities, and to ultimately proclaim pride in her multiracial identity, writing that, “I decided I was going to take the time to appreciate all my cultures and be equally present in each group of people along with other people who were mixed like me.” Leila noted that this writing served as a bridge between herself and the classmate who she sensed disliked her based on Leila’s “White” appearance, allowing the two of them to connect by sharing very different experiences exploring instances in which neither felt that they belonged.

While she found writing this piece to be a positive experience, commenting that she always enjoys writing “when it’s something that’s like, close, to me,” despite feeling “corny,” a similar writing assignment Leila described completing the previous semester served as an even more obvious impetus for her racial identity work. Leila has certainly spent her whole life navigating her racial identity, but in our interview, Leila described the first time she was required to write about herself at UBS as a confusing time. Explaining that a Sociology 101 writing prompt tasked her with answering the question of who she was, Leila realized that she still had some very important life questions to

figure out, including questions about her race. Leila reported struggling through this assignment:

Leila: So we were supposed to take these terms, and then like, write about yourself. I'm just like, damn, who am I? Like I don't, so, it just brought me here,

Jenny: Was this last semester?

Leila: Yeah. Last semester. But um, yeah. And I kinda just wrote about how like, even people, you know, in my family, kinda don't really accept me. Because like, I guess just the stigma, they're just like, well you're not full, you're not this, so they kinda try to take, like, take that away.

However, Leila saw the second essay on her multiraciality, one she wrote only one semester later, as much easier for her to write. She cited the passing of time and immersion in UBS campus life as reasons why she did not find the second assignment to be as difficult. Thus, writing about her multiraciality on these two occasions separated by time prompted Leila to engage her racial identity in very different ways. The earlier assignment enabled her to gain clarity; the writing served as a tool to help her solidify her security in her multiracial identity. Though the writing experience alone was not solely responsible for the often life-long pursuit that is racial identity acceptance, the composing context and the opportunity to explore aspects of her identity through writing likely facilitated Leila's development of a healthy multiracial identity.

In contrast to the angst she described experiencing as she struggled through the earlier essay, the conclusion of Leila's latter assignment reads,

Now I feel as though being multiracial works in my advantage more because I can connect and code switch when I need to. Every single day since I can remember from childhood until today someone always asks me 'what are you?' and sometimes it offends me... but I realize and appreciate others taking the effort out to learning about different cultures.

Thus, the two different writing experiences allowed Leila to overtly engage in identity work in two different ways: The first provided her with the opportunity to further consider who she is in many ways, including racially. Currently, Leila continues to build the identity she wishes to embrace, noting in an interview that “she is on the right track.” Having found the right track—a far cry from her puzzled, “Damn, who am I?”—one semester later, Leila’s writing on the same topic reflects her racial identity accomplishments: she recognizes her past struggles and concludes by demonstrating pride in the acceptance found in embracing all aspects of her racial and cultural identities. In the more recent piece, she is less actively searching for the identity she wishes to portray; rather, she is writing the self she has discovered into existence, and sharing that personal side of her in the academic space that she credits with helping her become more secure in her identity. Perhaps because of her very fair skin, Leila often fields questions about her racial identity, and at an HBU, she may be doing this even more frequently than if she attended a school where light skin would attract less attention. Leila’s experiences at UBS have been very positive, though, and her writing suggests she has reached a place in her racial identity journey where she is appreciative of her peers’ desire to understand her background. For Leila, writing in this context has served as a method for her to overtly explore and express her multiraciality.

Taylor: “You can’t really speak on race and stuff like that, because you’re not all the way Black.” In a Media Ethics course on the same campus, Taylor, a biracial Black and Hispanic (Puerto Rican) senior, also engaged in overt identity work through writing. Taylor’s writing is less celebratory and more defensive than Leila’s, as she fields questions regarding her Blackness and even outright rejections of this aspect of her

racial identity from her peers. It seems to Taylor that friends who know that she is biracial use this aspect of her identity to delegitimize her Blackness and try to disqualify views of Taylor's with which they disagree. For example, Taylor shared with me a discussion post she wrote regarding the controversial editing practices of photographer Steve McCurry. Taylor had no objection to McCurry's altering his photos, nor did she agree with the argument embraced by some of her classmates accusing the White photographer of exploiting impoverished people of color in remote areas of the world in the name of art. In her interview, Taylor described the following interaction between herself and her classmates.

Taylor first wrote an original post claiming that McCurry was a professional who was entitled to publish his work however he saw fit, and she argued that his racial identity was unimportant to his work. However, some of her classmates countered by "saying that because he was a White male... they incorporated race into it, and I'm like, that has nothing to do with... his work, if that's his specialty, then, ok." Taylor felt that some of her peers did not appreciate Taylor's rejection of their critiques of McCurry's Whiteness, and they responded on the discussion thread to Taylor by attacking her credibility as a Black woman, writing that she had no right to speak on race, on account of the fact that she's "not all the way Black." Taylor responded by retorting back, "that's the most ignorant thing you could say," to her peers on the discussion board.

Thus, Taylor uses writing to overtly engage in racial identity work by defending herself and reaffirming the Black side of her racial identity, even as she describes her classmates as using writing to force her to negotiate her racial identity in a very public space. Taylor confided to me that being raised in a Black household has been a defining

aspect of her racial identity; she identifies more strongly with the Black side of her racial heritage than the Hispanic side, noting, “I have to remind them [people who attempt to delegitimize her Blackness], like, I was raised in an African-American household...My mom’s still Black!” Her connection with her Black heritage, though, is not a rejection of her Hispanic background. She also finds herself negotiating her racial identity by defending her claim to this side of her heritage, once again doing so online, but this time, using her popularity on personal social media accounts to embrace her Hispanic heritage.

Taylor frequently writes online, and may have the largest social media following of all participants: Her Instagram followers number over 4,000. Knowing that many of her followers are people she knows in real life, she has used social media to post pictures of her father and explain her Hispanic-sounding last name, which often confuses people who assume she solely identifies as Black. In this way, Taylor uses social media as a platform for reconciling her followers’ conceptions of her last name as inauthentic with Taylor’s reality, as she seeks to embrace her biraciality and educate those who pose ignorant questions. Taylor, then, clearly illustrates overt racial identity work as she claims both of her parents’ racial heritages, defending her right to her identity in both formal and non-formal educational contexts.

Emma: “I don’t really know what I am.” Emma’s poetry took my breath away. The poems she shared with me demonstrated skillful use of imagery and powerful, precise word choices. Through her composing practices (both in and out of school), she frequently explores racial controversy, and her personal writing has been a particularly powerful means for her to engage in identity work related to questions she has regarding her Blackness and multiraciality. Emma identifies as Black, but she describes her father

as mixed, “really light,” noting that while she believes she is a quarter White, “I don’t really know what I am, to be honest. Like, I could have anything. But, I don’t know.” One of her most poignant writings from her journal explores the possibility that her father, whom Emma believes to be biracial, may have been a product of rape in the Civil Rights era. An excerpt from the beginning of that piece, a handwritten poem she scribbled into a tattered, well-worn journal, reads as follows:

I am black
... I am mixed
I was born of a brown-skinned
goddess and a tapioca coward
I often wonder if I am the offspring of the actions
of the same hollowness that held him
He was born in 1965 when abortion was still illegal in Pennsylvania
Regardless, the year after an angel was taken anyway and his disciples were killed
also with no remorse
During the decade of a revolution, gray clouds of war, weed, and a mix of black
and white
It was the age of Aquarius and the sunshine was just being let in
on brown skin, inside melanin rivers which the country lives off of
there was still an eclipse created by white shadows
I wondered if it covered her
I wonder if she had a kid by hatred and it raised him
up to be like itself because the darkness of blind hatred kept on overpowering the
light of darkness

Here we see Emma begin by proclaiming the racial identity, “I am black,” a construct she describes through her use of positive images elsewhere in the poem (“brown-skinned goddess,” “light of darkness”). A mere line and an ellipsis later, she amends her own categorization, writing, “I am mixed.” The “brown-skinned goddess” and the “tapioca coward” clearly illustrate Emma’s associations with her parents as binary; she elevates her Black mother to goddess status and uses strong, derogatory language to depict her “tapioca” father as oppositional and abhorrent. The reference to “her” in the line that reads, “I wonder if it covered her,” refers to her paternal grandmother, as Emma ponders

a child conceived by (White) “hatred” through rape, exploring the notion that her biracial father was an unwanted result of an unspeakable act committed by a White man.

Though this poem begins by clearly negotiating racial identity, moving from “I am black,” to “...I am mixed,” before speculating upon a horrific origin ultimately associated with Emma’s light skinned appearance, in this same writing, Emma refutes traditional notions of what it means to be Black, even as she negotiates her own Blackness. She writes,

Black females are supposed to be strong and outgoing
and proud of their ethnicity and religion but still allow themselves to be sexualized by men who degrade each other
we’re supposed to be deep but still like trap which I think
is utter bullshit
and if I don’t support racism against whites, then I’m not for blacks
especially because I have white in me
I feel weird when I say “nigga”
I feel guilty for drowning out my family’s gospel with alternative R&B and my own ecstasy
or if I disagree with God’s teaching or don’t listen to gospel, then I’m not a Christian
if I say the pro-black movement irritates me, then I’d get dragged
call me the fuck out because who said we were only our race?

Despite being raised in a Black household, Emma stated in her first interview that she wrote this in part because she “didn’t think she was Black. Like, stereotypically.” The eloquent images above show how she disrupts the stereotypes projected onto her as a Black woman, even as she struggles with finding the authority to do this, given her presumed multiraciality—does it make her less Black? Emma’s identity work through this writing is intentional and emotional, as she brings light to rigid stereotypes that cause her to question her claim to her Blackness. In this way, she overtly engages in racial identity work, obviously questioning her racial heritage and the way others perceive her

skin and behaviors before she goes on to challenge conceptions of Blackness as collections of stereotypes.

Transcending Race: “I’m Human.””

We have seen that participants have exercised selectivity both when it comes to if and when they choose to write about their race, as well as which aspects of their racial identities they opt to engage in writing. Participants’ racial identity work through composing practices was also shown to be overt, or not. Participants sometimes exercise fluidity of racialized identities in writing, opting to overtly write about aspects of their racial identities that are most pertinent to the composing task at hand, or, alternatively, avoiding writing about their own racial identities altogether. As a final finding for discussion, here I examine participants’ engagement in identity work through composing practices by analyzing their attempts to actively transcend racial labels altogether, in an effort to be perceived as people whose racial identities are but one part of a complex self that desires to connect with others beyond racial lines.

In discussing transcendence, I think it is important to clarify that I do not equate the transcendence found in my participants’ writing with colorblind ideologies, which I believe perpetuate dangerous—and false—narratives that suggest we have, as a society, reached a post-racial status. While this will be discussed more fully in Chapter Five, I will here briefly try to distinguish between the two. According to Choi (2008), “in the post-Jim Crow era, a good citizen is colorblind. Likewise, the prototype of a good teacher has been structured around the ideal of colorblindness;” however, “these colorblind ideologies work to disguise the racial privilege embedded in educational institutions” (p. 56). Thus, even well intentioned notions of colorblind ideology result in

hindering social progress, as such views condition citizens to believe that equity must be reality for everyone, as opposed to reality for everyone who looks like those who may not even recognize the privileges they enjoy. This belief prevents those who cling to this worldview from problematizing race; they have bought into the lie that racial discriminations are isolated or extreme acts, most of which occurred in the past. They believe that it is possible to see past race, having been taught that race is unimportant—the problem with such a view is that it does not account for systemic and institutional racism. When it comes to problems associated with race, such as overrepresentation of people of color underperforming in schools, living in poverty, and experiencing incarceration, colorblind ideologies allow for a blame-the-victim mentality as opposed to inviting critical questioning of unjust systems.

On the other hand, transcendence, as I see it, also refers to a disregarding of racial labels; however, I see this as a critical movement that does not attempt to deny the realities of living in a racist society. Rather, through desires to transcend race, I found that my participants recognized the racial categorizations in our society as both arbitrary and heartbreaking, unjust and unrelenting. Even as racial labeling is inaccurate and, at times, meaningless, these labels are assigned to participants on a moment-to-moment basis and carry real, inescapable consequences. Transcending, as I explore it here, is a response to a society that demands racial classification, even as we have supposedly reached a post-racial era. Transcendence stems from participants' fatigue brought on by constantly negotiating responses to the "What are you?" question; it represents a longing to blur the color lines that divide us, even as it recognizes that such lines clearly still exist.

All participants practice transcendence in some form or another, with some of them trading a racial description of him or herself in for another preferred label—for David, his Christianity is a defining identity that encompasses all of the other ways he sees himself as a person, including as a person of a particular racial background. Armona is very conscious of her identity as a teammate on an athletic team; her posts on social media are quick to praise other team members and draw attention away from herself while still displaying the love and passion she has for her sport. Taylor is purposeful in all of her social media activity, seeking above all to motivate and encourage others; her identity as an overcomer is inseparable from her sense of self. Michael says, “I’m just Michael.”

Brandee noted her rejection of racial labels as a set of behaviors, explaining, “I don’t think you can act the color. You can’t say, ‘You’re acting white.’ You can’t act the color.” Gabby made a similar statement, arguing that

I try not to put a race label on anything. Because, people are going to be who they are. Like, you can’t just say, a Black person’s ghetto, because they’re Black, no. Because if you ever go to the hood, there is definitely White people act just as ghetto as Black people. And, it makes me mad when they’re like, oh yeah, Black people—like, I don’t know why Black girls act the way they do, because they’re--they’re doing this, or they’re doing that, and I’m just like, no. It’s in, it’s in every ethnicity, someone has acted a certain way. And then um, and then everyone’s trying to put, White girls should act like this, because this is how they were raised, and Black girls should act like this, because this is how they’re raised, and I’m like, why? Does it really matter, of like, who does what? If a White girl wants to wear box braids, like, is it going to affect you because *she* thought that *she* looked good with box braids, or if a Black girl wanted to wear a blonde wig, does that honestly affect you? Like, I feel like people should, should mix cultures. I feel like people should not be stuck in their ways, this is not the 1800s, like, [laughs] like, mix, mix your culture up.

As Gabby’s comment demonstrates, participants commonly problematized notions of Blackness, Whiteness, and other racial constructs. To varying degrees, they embrace

identities as multiracial individuals, or they choose to identify with a dominant identity despite having claims to multiracial heritage. All of them also defined themselves in ways not specific to race, and they used composing practices through various means to contribute to those definitions. Some participants, though, actively used writing as a powerful way to transcend one or more specific racial labels. These are the cases I discuss here.

In her writing, Leila puts it quite simply. In response to the “What are you?” question, she wishes to respond in the following way: “I want to say ‘a human.’” This conclusion follows her eloquent exploration of her own multiraciality, which she does not dismiss, but rather embraces; nevertheless, she ultimately wishes to transcend racial labels, even as she recognizes the daily questions regarding her appearance, while annoying, also give her an opportunity to share her culture and connect with others. Leila reiterated this in an interview, stating once again, “I’m a human,” and further explaining, now I kinda feel like I have a sense of who I am, like I can be more than one thing. You know? Even though people think that you can’t. Like it’s possible to be in every mold and then that mold in itself is another mold.

Her simultaneous acceptance of each “mold” and the state of being in multiple molds at once shows how Leila embraces multiplicity in transcending binary labels.

Taylor also longs for transcendence, claiming that she hopes her writing will be received by an audience who will see her not as Black, nor Puerto Rican, but as a person whose value surpasses any assigned to her by racial categorization:

Taylor: When it comes to like, my writing, and who I am, I just, I want people to read this, like they don’t know me. But, they understand me. I don’t want people to say, oh, the Black girl, or she’s Puerto Rican, I want people to like, read my writing or whatever I put out there, and see that it’s more than what’s on the exterior.

Jenny: So you think writing is a way like, a way to um, get people to connect beyond labels?

Taylor: Mm-hm. Yeah.

Thus, Taylor may purposefully choose not to focus on aspects of her racial identity in the positive and uplifting blogging and posting that she does, for while she reports having written about being biracial in this space before, such posts are not a common practice of hers. In an effort to project an identity that is globally embraced by people of multiple backgrounds, social media savvy Taylor conscientiously chooses not to highlight aspects of her identity that might prevent her from reaching someone whose background is different than hers. Still, it is worth noting that her Instagram page contains many photos of Taylor, so she is certainly not ashamed of her racial identity as perceived through appearance in the photos she chooses to post of herself online. As someone who feels a deep calling to reach out to others through motivating and encouraging posts, and as someone who subscribes to colorblind ideologies, Taylor's desire to be perceived as someone beyond either, or even both, of her racial identities may be an effort to help move society in the direction she wishes it would go.

Finally, Emma uses her talents as a creative writer to contest racial labels and to present herself to the world as a unique and beautiful individual, a woman who rejects the oversimplification of racial identification and instead dreams of a world where she and all those who feel ostracized by racial assumptions can break free together. Emma described her thought process in the following way, as she reflected on what she was trying to achieve in her writing: “in the end, I think I just disregarded race and just thought of myself as a person.” The following lines illustrate Emma’s rejection of racial (and other) labels, as well as the society that perpetuates them:

I'm seventeen and made of a rainbow of souls and stardust
and Jesus's love and Satan's insecurity, stupidity, wisdom, and poetry
a lot of poetry
I'm black, white, red, purple, salmon, and glitter, covered
in a gray society
and one day, we'll blend with all the other weirdoes out there
but until then, my colorful silence will be my rebellion against black voices and
white wars

Her eloquent and decisive dismissal of colorism indicates transcendentalism, as Emma seeks to be seen as deeper than any one label our “gray” society could pin on her. In other personal writing, Emma explores similar themes. For example, a second entry in her journal includes the following lines:

born with a fraction of superiority, my
blackness confuses me
we are known to be storms: loud, altering, unapologetic;
i am just a spring rain

Here, as in her previous work, Emma once again uses writing as a tool to explore her multiracial identity through writing, using vivid metaphors to contest popular notions of Blackness and grapple with complex feelings related to the “fraction of superiority” her presumed Whiteness affords her. Another stanza in the same work that describes her skin, body, lips, and self as “caramel,” “curved,” “plump,” and “sexy” serves as a sharp contrast to a group of lines patterned in the same sentence structure that instead list her appearance--and herself--in a more negative depiction:

my lips are glossed
my hair is relaxed
my mind is anxious
i call myself insecure

It is worth noting that the first two lines in the above stanza, which show Emma conforming to traditional notions of beauty (with “relaxed” being especially associated with White notions of beautiful straight hair), are followed by two negative adjectives,

“anxious” and “insecure.” These descriptions are juxtaposed with the aforementioned lines highlighting what some people (perhaps mostly men) view as positive attributes often expected in women of color (caramel, curved, plump) that conclude with Emma writing, “i call myself sexy.” This poem, as does the previous one, allows Emma to write her way through positive and negative feelings she is navigating in her racial identity journey. This work also expresses her desire to transcend racial stereotypes; she is a spring rain in a world of storms.

Emma and the other participants do not participate in transcendence in a blatant dismissal of race as unimportant; on the contrary, racial identity navigation has been a pivotal element of participants’ senses of their selves, a key component in their daily lives. Rather, participants who write to contest labels and encourage transcendence are valuing multiple racial identities, even as those racial identities shift to become secondary to their conceptions of who they are as human beings.

CHAPTER V

Trading “Colorful Silence” for a Blended Tomorrow

“until then, my colorful silence will be my rebellion against black voices and white wars”—Emma

Findings of contemporary scholarship clearly show that students’ racial identities play a major role in their literacy practices at school in and out of formal educational settings. According to Banks (2004), “The cultural communities in which individuals are socialized are also epistemological communities that have shared beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge” (p. 228). Some multiracial students—Armona and David are great examples—grow up exposed to and comfortable with White cultural norms; these students benefit from their familiarity with the culture of power perpetuated through the instructional and assessment practices of American school systems (Delpit, 1995; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004), even as they may encounter prejudices and/or face discrimination that their monoracial White peers do not. Other multiracial students who have no familial ties to Whiteness may find that their racial identities as people of color take on especially salient roles when it comes to experiencing literacy in the classroom; the same may be true for those who have claims to Whiteness but whose physical appearances and/or or cultural mannerisms suggest to others that they are people of color. It is no surprise that White students typically outperform students of color in academic spaces, as schools cater to ways of knowing and communicating valued by the dominant culture; this phenomenon has been documented time and time again in the literature (Banks, 2004; Knaus, 2006; Noguera, 2012; Delpit, 1995).

Banks (2004) argues, “Knowledge, no matter how thoughtful and logical, usually fades when it goes against powerful political and economic forces” (p. 231). Growing up multiracial, the students in this study have developed powerful understandings of what it

means to come of age in a country determined to label, assume, and discriminate based on race. The knowledge participants have gained through their lived experiences in racial margins—in the *borderlands*, Anzaldua (2007) suggests—confirm that while a post-racial, colorblind America is an appealing idolization of our country's progress, this America remains mythical, existing only in the lives of those whose privilege protects them from experiencing daily injustices that are commonplace for those who reside in these borderlands.

Though participants' lives offer powerful disruptions of colorblind narratives, the dominant ideology that serves middle and upper class White interests continues largely unchallenged in our educational systems (Tate, 1997; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004; Banks, 2004), with many students and even educators believing in the myths CRT seeks to challenge. These mythical ideologies espoused by the culture of power include meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). A large number of students and teachers who enjoy White privilege are likely unaware of the many ways that the educational and other systems in America are designed to facilitate their success (McIntosh, 1988). As Delpit (1995) notes, "Those with power are frequently least aware of...its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (p. 26). Multiracial students, then, inhabit a unique space in formal educational contexts, as many of them reside somewhere in between this power struggle and likely possess a heightened sense of awareness of the polarizing and problematic racial perceptions America's colorblind ideology often prevents us from discussing. Unless they typically pass for White, multiracial students are likely to find that they have less access to the sort of power described by Delpit and Banks than do their White

monoracial peers, and because of their multiracial lived experiences, they may be more aware of the complexities involved in this power struggle than are monoracial students of color. Still, Knaus (2006) writes that most multiracial people “experience racism from white society in often very similar ways as monoracial people of color...the social position of people of color is and has been, relative to white people, inadequate at best and in most cases, downright horrendous” (p. 8). Findings in this study spoke back to these inadequacies and injustices, as participants both wrote of and discussed with me racism and marginalization they experienced due their statuses as people of color and as multiracial individuals.

Though multiracial students are frequently labeled according to their minority member status by the White population, many multiracial students also struggle to find acceptance among their monoracial peers of color (Knaus, 2006; Root, 2004; Kellogg & Lidell, 2012). Experiencing prejudice from both majority and minority groups, often navigating the demands of multiple cultural contexts, multiracial students have valuable perspectives to share about their lives in our classrooms, their communities, and our country. Writing and other composing practices provide such a means for sharing these perspectives, and this study showed that nine multiracial participants engaged in racial identity work through composing in a variety of ways across different settings. As I used a CRT lens to examine the ways these students positioned themselves in writing, as well as how they felt positioned by others, I found that in general, my participants expressed positive views of their own identities, racially and otherwise. Some more than others had experienced overt racism. Some more than others believed in the meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality CRT seeks to debunk. Some more than others grappled with or

considered other aspects of their identities—such as faith, gender, or social position—more significant in their daily lives than their racial backgrounds.

What all of them had in common, though, was experiencing some degree of marginalization due to their status as multiracial people. Anzaldua uses writing to proclaim, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing” (2007, p. 81). Likewise, I present the implications of this research, thankful for the varied group of participants who contributed to this study. I value their diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, political leanings, and feelings about writing, regardless of my own tendencies to agree or disagree with their opinions, to accept or question the beliefs that they shared with me. Here I argue that the growing multiracial population deserves to be heard, that their experiences navigating racial identities have much to teach all of us about the ways we categorize ourselves and others when it comes to race and perhaps other aspects of our lives, and that composing practices sometimes privilege and other times deny the exploration, construction, and expression of racial identities in a variety of contexts. As educators, it is to the benefit of all of our students for us to consider how assignments in our classrooms inspire or encourage, or conversely, limit or intimidate writers by the ways they suggest, encourage, suppress, or silence manifestations of racial identities. These manifestations are shaped through the curricular topics such assignments address, the classroom environments and larger scholarly communities in which they occur, and the implied or explicit genre expectations that allow for or deny the presentation of raced selves in textual form.

Selectivity: Facilitating Empowering Circumstances

Findings suggested that selectivity was an important theme for all participants—in examining how multiracial emergent adult college students engaged in racial identity work through their composing practices, all participants exercised selectivity by discussing “if” and “when” they chose to engage in such work through the various composing activities in which they participated. Further, if a decision was made to use composing to explore or project racial identity, “which” also became a salient question, as participants selected particular aspects from their available multiracial identities to engage: one, both, or all. The aspects participants opted to engage with varied by context, as did their answers to the questions “if” and “when.” Here I take a look at implications for educators based on the theme of selectivity, discussing the importance of this concept as it applies for those who have interests in composing practices as they occur in formal educational contexts.

Even on campuses where students feel diversity is promoted and their racial identities are valued, it may be beneficial for educators and other stakeholders to explore opportunities for further incorporating the use of composing practices to help students delve into racial identity work and communicate important aspects of their identities to others. For example, though the participants from Somerco unanimously described the campus as inclusive and accepting, their composing practices and discussions of those practices with me suggest there may be room to reconsider ways writing could be used as a tool for racial (and other) identity work. Recall that Kya’s racialized expressions of her own identity went unacknowledged by her instructor when Kya reviewed feedback on her essay analyzing an advertisement depicting a Black woman—though Kya was excited

about the text that she had composed, she was particularly disappointed that her instructor did not validate Kya's insights. This lack of acknowledgment is perhaps all the more troubling considering Kya and the other participants from Somerco indicated that Somerco was a welcoming environment for students of all different backgrounds and cultures. Thus, even on campuses known for diversity—18-year-old Michael referenced diversity as being one of Somerco's core values in an interview—faculty may benefit from considering how they may affirm students' racial identity work within classroom spaces.

Moreover, colleges may provide valuable avenues of identity exploration to multiracial and other students by making conscientious efforts to increase student awareness of available writing opportunities. For example, though Kya loved to write in her personal time, and though she wrote a very moving poem voicing her fears about how her Black fiancé was perceived by White strangers, she was unaware that Somerco offered a literary magazine for her to further develop her craft and perhaps share her writing with a wider audience. The advisors of the award-winning literary magazine hang posters across campus, regularly send out emails requesting student submissions and student participation on the editorial board, and host open mics in the cafeteria encouraging any and all students to read their own poetry or perform other pieces of their choice. Events are often held in conjunction with the Black Student Union, and open mics frequently take place during busy lunch time hours when many students can observe and opt to participate. Yet, a student like Kya, who has a passion for writing and actually voices a desire to learn how to develop her skills as a creative writer, was unaware of existing opportunities to connect with others to share and improve her work. Greater

collaboration across disciplines to promote student involvement in extracurricular writing opportunities could benefit Kya and students like her at many other colleges. Ideally, continued promotion of writing opportunities would not presume that potential participants should be limited to those who are high achievers on coursework writing assignments—despite Kya’s struggles with the essay genre in her English 101 class, she is a gifted poet. How many instructors are likely to guess that students who regularly earn Cs and below on academic writing assignments actually write frequently and passionately outside of school?

Further, within classroom contexts, we can challenge ourselves to support students to more frequently and fully explore their racial (and other important) identities through the writing that they do in their coursework. When the content allows students to select topics in which their own racial identities might impact the way writers approach assignments, perhaps instructors could be more intentional about introducing prompts that encourage students to draw on their own experiences throughout the writing process, particularly in the phases of generating ideas and revising. Several participants across all campuses reported being able to select their own topics for the essays they wrote in various classes; a best practice (Atwell, 1985; Beaton, 2010) that educators should continue. Introducing structured opportunities allowing students to connect chosen topics to their own lives might encourage students like Michael, who note that they have difficulty expanding ideas, to become more invested in their writing and more thoughtful about how they can support claims as they draft and redraft. Even if an instructor wanted to forbid the use of personal pronouns or inclusion of student writers’ own life experiences in final drafts, such activities throughout the duration of an assignment could

certainly serve as catalysts for writers to become more engaged with their topics and brainstorm new ways to develop relevant support for their claims. Such activities need not have a focus on race, but students who have selected racialized topics should be given a private platform to examine connections between their own identities and the points they want to make in their essays, perhaps through low-stakes, explorative writing assignments during which the focus is on considering various ways self-selected topics matter in individual students' lives. Instructors could model such activities by sharing examples of their own free-writing, listing, clustering, or other methods of brainstorming that demonstrate personal connections they've made to a variety of topics; sharing both raced and race-neutral reflections could allow students the opportunities to connect their racial identities to their chosen topics or not, depending on their interests, comfort level, and the relevance their racial identities have to the topics at hand.

Since there were times in this study when participants' writing left clear connections to their personal racial identities unexplored, instructors might consider explicitly inviting students to do this kind of thinking through the types of activities described above. Such exercises have the power to dramatically improve student writing—recall that in Michael's case, the experiences he shared talking about race in his interviews were far more striking than the generalities he expressed in his essays. Once trust is established, even students such as Michael, who claim to dislike writing, may find spaces to engage in meaningful racial identity work. Though not in a formal writing assignment, I recently found out that Michael does use composing to grapple with personal matters related to race. Months after the data collection phase of this study ended, Michael used writing—texting—just last week to share with me another

experience he had regarding a police officer who made an incorrect assumption about his racial identity. Our texting went on for quite some time, and we exchanged thoughts about the erroneous conclusions of strangers, the boxes available for students to check to describe their races, and many other matters related to multiraciality. Remember, this is a student who reiterated several times throughout his interviews that he doesn't like writing. Yet, he was very meaningfully engaged in exploring his racial identity through writing via text message exchange with a monoracial White educator he'd known for only a limited time. Imagine how much more powerful his college experience might be if space was created for him to write like this in his classrooms, perhaps alongside students who've had both similar and different experiences.

Racial discussions are often uncomfortable, and White educators may be particularly reluctant to encourage racial dialogue, feeling trepidation and lack of preparation (Tatum, 1997; Choi, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). Tatum (1997) calls teachers to move beyond fear, writing, "regardless of your subject matter, there are ways to engage students in critical thinking about racism which are relevant to your discipline" (p. 204). She also reflects on the psychological effects of institutional racism, noting that people of color suffer alienation and internalized oppression, and that "the consequences are different but also damaging for Whites...many Whites have been encouraged by their culture of silence to disconnect from their racial experiences" (p. 201). However, when White instructors are brave enough to share times from their own lives that they became aware of race, their students will be more likely to critically examine how their own racial identities impact the way they experience the world around them. This can be seen in the work of Marx and Pennington (2003), who wrote that as their students

grew comfortable discussing their racism in the language of CRT, we were surprised at how easily they referred to “my racism,” and “the kind of racism I have.” Moreover, as they were able to talk about it in a less constrained, more fluent manner, they became more critical of it. Instead of not seeing White racism at all, they began to see it everywhere, even within themselves. As they became critical of it, many of them began to devise ways in which to do something about it. (pp. 104-105)

Marx and Pennington’s work was with undergraduates; they both taught student teachers. Regardless of discipline, if college instructors thoughtfully establish classroom contexts in which they create spaces for all students to write about race in ways that are related to course content, many higher education courses can provide students with opportunities for racial identity exploration and communication. Tatum (1997) writes that

Because of persistent residential and school segregation, the opportunities young people in the United States have had to interact with those racially, ethnically, or religiously different from them are quite limited. This lack of direct experience means that what one learns about “the other” is based on secondhand information...Exactly who “the other” is varies, depending where students have grown up and what their life experience has been. But we can be sure that all members of our campus populations have come to college with stereotypes and prejudices about other segments of the student body. (pp. 212)

Since Tatum wrote those words in 1997, the rapid evolutions in communicative technology and surging popularity of social networking sites have surely connected us with “others” in ways that were difficult if not impossible to imagine prior to the turn of the century. However, both Obama’s election to the presidency and the accompanying rhetoric that suggested we were post-racial as well as Trump’s campaign and election, which was plagued by incidents and language essentially dispelling that myth, offer evidence that we are either likely to continue pretending qualities that “other” us do not exist; or, conversely, view those “others” as people to fear and mistrust. Both views are dangerous and hinder social progress.

Multiracial students who are given opportunities to write in campus contexts may be able to share particularly powerful perspectives that may disrupt and challenge those views—just as Leila’s essay regarding her own multiraciality broke down racial barriers that were based on false assumptions, other multiracial writers may find themselves able to connect with monoracial students who have never before had reason to question racial categorizations. Similarly, as Emma’s inclusion of her racial identity assisted her in problematizing popular conceptions of beauty, many students of color and students who are marginalized due to other aspects of their identities may find ways to use their own experiences to clarify ideas and enrich arguments as they submit written assignments countering dominant ideologies, all while they are demonstrating evolving critical thinking and mastery of course objectives.

When evaluating and responding to student work, we should keep in mind the ways in which students may receive our assessments and comments as pertinent to their personal identities. Recall that when Kya received a low grade after opting to include her own racial identity in an English essay, she was very hurt, yet she claimed she understood the justification. Still, she longed to be validated and affirmed, if nothing else, for her ideas. The instructor’s comments, however, were almost exclusively limited to formatting and grammatical concerns. Kya felt that her teacher was grading her in this manner in an effort to help her improve, and she did not see the plentiful red marks as unnecessary. In this way, Kya’s case echoes the view Delpit (1995) argues for: explicitly teaching the “rules” of the culture of power.

Following Delpit (1995), Martinsen (2000), and Asselin (2002), I do believe formal grammar instruction is necessary. Having spent much of my career teaching in

developmental and introductory level college English classes, I believe such instruction can be beneficial in these courses, whether they occur in a community college or four-year setting. My concern with the way in which Kya's work was evaluated is that her instructor seemed to focus *solely* on grammar and mechanics, at least through the written feedback she provided to Kya in all of the graded writing assignments shared with me. Gee (1999) would also take issue with the evaluation of Kya's work. He argues that people of color are often viewed by educators with a deficit perspective, when, in fact, the primary discourses of many such people, while different from the discourse of the culture of power, are equally complex and worthy of validation. Kya seemed caught in the Gee/Delpit debate, as she both craved validation and resisted the language of power her teacher demanded: she expressed a desire for her insightful writing to be recognized while complaining that she doesn't "think in MLA format." But even as Kya struggled with what was for her a clash between her preferred writing style/linguistic identity and the expected standards of the community college classroom, she defended her instructor's attention to surface-level errors in her writing.

No matter what sort of assignment those of us who grade student writing are tasked with evaluating, we must not forget that writing is always a personal act. Research shows that evaluation of student writing is overwhelmingly corrective in nature, with students rarely receiving affirmation through teacher comments (Agbayahoun, 2016). Martinsen (2000) describes the disheartening effects on students when their papers are returned "dripping red" (p. 124) from the instructors' merciless marking of surface level errors. We must remember that in our commenting, we are not just scoring writing. We are evaluating a version of a student's self. And while grammar should be

marked, and appropriate grades must be assigned, we should not forget that some students write about deeply personal issues. Whether this seems to be the case or not, we have a responsibility to affirm whatever aspects of the writing we can as opposed to focusing only on what students have failed to do well. Balanced feedback that correct wrongs and identifies weaknesses—while also praising whatever strengths a text offers and whatever growth a writer has shown—is an end result we should all strive to reach. Our students are sharing a piece of themselves when they write for us, and some of them are choosing to write about very personal matters. The least we can do is acknowledge the content inside the wrapped gift before we complain about a sloppy wrapping job.

Not only do we need to be careful not to do students any damage in our own response to their writing, we also need to strive to encourage appropriate interactions among peers while still allowing for open dialogue. This will be further discussed as I examine implications of inviting students to engage in overt racial identity work through composing practices. When it comes to selectivity, we as educators have an opportunity to empower students by letting them decide whether or not to write about race on their own terms, while still providing support for them to do so if they wish. What follows next is a consideration of the knowledge we need to respond to students who choose to overtly take up this work in our classrooms.

Significance of Overt Racial Identity Work through Composing Practices

As several participants demonstrated, overtly writing about one's racial identity can be a powerful means of negotiation, affording writers opportunities to examine who they believe themselves to be, who they want to be, and how those representations of identity relate to who the world says that they are. For participants in this study who

identified strongly as writers, composing is a way of thinking, one which allows them to reach understandings of their racial identities that they may not have come to if not for the acts of writing as thinking. Bolton (2011) claims, “writing can communicate psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual truths. This insight can be achieved appropriately and gently when people give themselves permission to explore experience and express feelings, memories and knowledge through writing” (p. 18). As we have seen through both Emma and Leila’s cases, these young women were able to express psychological longings of accepting their own multiracial identities with conceptions they had developed regarding the ways they felt perceived by others. Both participants explored this through composing practices, though they wrote in different genres and in different contexts.

For those of us who teach students of color in higher educational contexts, we should be aware that topics that suggest or demand students write about race may be seen as welcome or unwelcome invitations for overt identity work. As teachers, we have a responsibility to be sensitive to the ways our students perceive themselves and each other, especially as these perceptions relate to what we are asking them to do in our classrooms. Multiracial students, as I have discussed previously, often must negotiate acceptance in terms of their racial identities. It is a shame that some of the rejection they face may occur in classroom contexts, even in higher education. Think back to Taylor’s experience as she attempted to engage in written discussion with classmates in an upper-level Media Ethics course. Peers who knew Taylor identified as biracial attempted to discredit her Blackness; Taylor exercised selectivity when she drew on her identity as a Black woman to respond to the comments, declaring her classmates to be ignorant. This,

too, is another example depicting Anzaldua's (2007) unnatural boundaries: why must Taylor feel that membership in two worlds makes her lesser of a member in either one? As society draws lines that divide multiracial families, lines that indeed require multiracial individuals to navigate their own allegiances to distinct identities in a divisive and segregated world, selectivity is employed as a natural response to such unnatural boundary lines.

Writing assignments that ask students to explore racial topics or identities may be powerful and enlightening experiences for multiracial students—or, conversely, they may cause students undue stress, enticing them to write more about themselves than they have even come to terms with. Such types of writing have been described as “risky writing” by Berman (2001). The cases explored in this study have included examples of participants experiencing both the benefits and discomforts that come from risky writing. Potentially uncomfortable writing assignments need not be avoided—but instructors and the larger campus context should be aware of and offer resources to multiracial (and other) students who find the navigation of racial identities to be challenging.

Furthermore, instructors who incorporate opportunities for risky writing in the classroom need to anticipate responses from classmates, considering how they can intervene if students resort to personal attacks as they engage in dialogue about heated racial issues. This possible detrimental consequence may arise when students write about topics that invite or require them to disclose racial identities; classmates’ responses may be unpredictable. Dutro et. al (2005) encountered this with much younger students, but sadly, Taylor’s case shows that even upper-level undergraduate students may resort to offensive questioning or rejecting of racial identities when topics get heated. Taylor did

report that her instructor stepped in when the discussion board writing took an ugly and personal turn—and in all likelihood, this instructor most likely had no indication that Taylor’s classmates would resort to attacking her racial identity when they disagreed with her opinion. As educators, we cannot abandon reading, writing, and talking about race with our students, despite the discomfort that may arise during such conversations and activities—but we should take care to cultivate classrooms and environments where personal matters of race are able to be discussed without students fearing that they will endure a rejection of their lived experiences from classmates whose backgrounds differ from their own. Whether we design opportunities for students to reflect on racial identities through writing, or, as in Taylor’s case, even if students are unforeseeably forced to engage in this identity work in our classrooms, we should be sensitive to the often personal and complicated realities that multiracial students face when it comes to responding to questions of identity, particularly if we teach classes that require or encourage students to do so through writing.

The difficulties that Taylor was cornered into writing about mirror those that Leila and Emma wrote about in order to process and express their feelings. And even though their composing practices may not have depicted these struggles, all participants discussed having experienced racial identity conflicts, to varying degrees. Anzaldua articulates these challenges, claiming, “Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element” (2007, p. 19). Anzaldua goes on to define borders as dividing lines, and borderlands as “vague and underdetermined” places “created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (p. 25). “The mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed” live

here, Anzaldua writes (p. 25). Several of the writing samples participants shared with me regarding multiracial identity reflected emotional exhaustion, as participants recounted the difficulties they faced navigating distinct cultures, experiencing rejection from others—even their own family members—and fielding constant questions from outsiders regarding their racial identities. Though Anzaldua’s work is not limited to examining the marginalization of multiracial people, Leila, Emma, and Taylor’s use of composing practices overtly shows how the “unnatural boundaries” Anzaldua describes have defined their lives. These boundaries include those created by participants’ multiraciality, as well as those that they have crossed by virtue of being people of color attempting to navigate academic spaces in which “Whiteness was simply the unexamined norm” (Tatum, 1997, p. 93).

On occasion, writing was used overtly by some participants as an outlet to deal with “emotional residue” created by their inhabitance of Anzaldua’s borderlands, a condition relegated to all participants for no other reason than their very existences. The rejection Leila writes of from her own family members illustrates to the extreme just how unnatural of a border she faces—her own flesh and blood separate themselves from her. We have no way of knowing all of the borderlands our various students inhabit—and it would be beyond the scope of a work day, and in all likelihood, many students’ preferences, for us to make it our mission to discover all of them—but at the very least, we should consider the challenges inherent in asking students to apply concepts such as those found in sociology or psychology to their own lives.

I am not suggesting that there is not value in these types of assignments, or that even if a student is made uncomfortable by an essay that asks her to examine her race or

other aspects of her identity, that the assignment should be removed from the curriculum. After all, Leila found the second assignment in which she wrote about her multiraciality invigorating, and she much enjoyed sharing her finished essay with a classmate. What I am advocating for is a greater awareness of the complexity some students experience when it comes to writing about their racial identities. Multiraciality is not always apparent, and some students who have complicated or unexplored feelings regarding their own multiracial identities may appear monoracial to instructors or peers. Though the number of college students who identify as multiracial is small compared to monoracial populations, it is growing quite rapidly (Paladino & Davis, 2006; Renn, 2000; Kellogg & Lidell, 2012; Knaus, 2006). Thus, educators should not presume monoraciality, and if we teach content (such as sociology or psychology) or require assignments that invite (or demand) students to examine their race in a personal way, we may wish to offer students a list of possibilities that allow them a variety of options for demonstrating mastery of content. Not only does student choice improve writing quality (Atwell, 1985), it allows students who long for opportunities to explore their racial identities through composing the chance to do so while also protecting the privacy of students who do not wish to engage in racial identity work through writing at a particular time and in a specific context.

Why Transcendence Matters

The third major theme to emerge from the findings in these participants' writing samples and interviews is that of transcendence. Transcendence is similar to selectivity in a way—sometimes, in selecting one racial identity over another to highlight for a particular writing task, participants exercised transcendence in moving across labels.

More than that, though, other instances of transcendence involved a conscious choice not to draw focus to one's race, in favor of emphasizing another preferred identity: Woman, Christian, Teammate, Lover, Student, etc. The most powerful examples of transcendence, however, were those that, in the words of participant Emma, "disregarded race," not by ignoring affiliations to racial labels—but by problematizing those labels, thus disrupting unnatural boundaries (Anzaldua, 2007) by demonstrating that composing practices can be used to author selves who reject superficial categories in favor of multiple, blended, and inclusive notions of racial identity.

Implications of this finding suggest that we may be able to empower students to discover ways to "re-author" themselves as the selves they wish to be, using writing and other compositions as a means to disrupt and dispute unwanted perceptions of themselves in favor of proclaiming their preferred identities, racial and otherwise. Existing literature depicts successful examples of students of color engaging in such feats; for example, Staples' (2008) work with an afterschool youth group enabled students to re-author a more positive representation of Black masculinity after the students critically analyzed conceptions of Black males in popular culture. Muhammad (2012) offers a similar case study that demonstrates Black females are also able to disrupt negative images of Black femininity through writing. Likewise, Alim et. al (2010) argue that identities are enacted through performances including free-style rap battles, which give participants opportunities to negotiate and contest identities.

This study was ripe with participants who used composing practices to re-author themselves as they wished to be perceived. In Taylor's case, she used composing to "re-story" herself into who she desired her readers to imagine her to be: In class, a woman

who defends her right to her dominant Black racial identity. Out of class, someone who will not tolerate speculation over claims to her Hispanic heritage. Anzaldua (2007) claims that stories have the ability to transform both storyteller and listener. Participants in this study demonstrate the power of this claim, because though they don't describe themselves as storytellers, they write themselves into the world as they see fit across different contexts.

Across contexts, readers must confront their own understandings of what membership to a particular racial group entails as they encounter texts proclaiming multiracial identities that disrupt monoracial norms of categorization. Participants' racial identities were sometimes influenced by the assumptions of those who labeled them, but often, writing was used to respond to, negotiate with, and even refute those perceived assumptions. Thus, participants constructed (shifting) racial identities through composing practices both in and out of formal educational contexts, creating overarching stories of identities in progress, identities which transcend singular projections of racialized selves. These participants' stories, and all of our stories, are a cumulative and evolving sum of our varied composing practices and other performative acts—I argue that such selves, which may seem contradictory at times, are not necessarily incompatible, but rather, transcendent. Leila illustrates this principle because just as she embraces her multiraciality in an essay which serves as a declaration of acceptance of her multiple cultures, one line later, Leila admits to being sick of the questioning from time to time, positing herself as more than any one race: "I'm a human." So are we all. And in being such, we acquire, assume, declare and experiment with ever changing identities

as we consider and reconsider our own values, who we want to be, and who we want others to see us as.

The nine participants in this study fluidly navigated discursal selves as they wrote for their courses and for themselves, for their instructors and for others. Sometimes students created their own opportunities to engage in identity work through transcendence, as in the case of Emma, who wrote eloquently in her journal about the ways she sees herself defying pre-established notions of what it means to be a person of a particular race. Taylor, whose identity on social media was carefully thought-out and well-established, was intentional through her status updates and other posts in her desire to connect with broad audiences. In discussing these composing practices, she also spoke of a longing to transcend racial labels in an effort to communicate her encouraging and uplifting messages to a wide spectrum of potential readers. Formal educational contexts could also serve as a conduit for such transcendence, though: Recall that in this context, Leila proclaims in the conclusion of her essay: “I’m a human.” Her subsequent sharing of this text with a classmate whom Leila had sensed previously disliked her served as a bridge between Leila and her peer: the writing allowed them to connect beyond perceived racial differences.

If transcendence can be practiced in such a powerful way in Leila’s writing, literally changing a classmate’s entire view of her, imagine the other bridges that our students might cross if we encourage transcendence in all applicable aspects of our students’ lives: writing about real struggles for acceptance and how we negotiate our place in this world can help students connect to each other, not only across racial lines, but in many other ways. Students who resist connecting to others who don’t look like

them or think like them might very well find they have more in common than they think with classmates of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, or sexual orientations. The literature review on students' out of school writing practices discussed in Chapter Two identified the writers' main purposes as writing to create connections with others and to represent selves (Schultz et. al 2016). The composing practices that the participants in this study engaged in outside of formal educational contexts aligned with the findings of Schultz et. al, but the powerful transcendence that Leila demonstrates in her writing for English class suggests that perhaps it is time for academic spaces to further assist students in achieving those purposes of connection and representation.

Yancey (2009) makes a call for writing teachers to develop new curricula to support models of composing that more closely align with the meaningful writing that students do outside of school, Rief (2003) declares that writing matters and makes a difference in our lives when students are able to write about what they care about, and Kumamoto (2002) advocates for formal educational contexts to allow for facilitating self-construction processes through writing “in the continuous turning and reifying of students' critical understandings of themselves and the world around them” (p. 83). Despite these calls from the early 2000s, and the one I quote below issued by hooks even earlier, in the mid-90s, it is a shame that much of the writing students do in formal educational contexts remains disconnected from their lives outside of school. This is all the more disheartening, considering how this study has demonstrated the undeniable influence of writing to positively impact students: Leila's transcendence of racial labels inside the classroom showcases the power that writing has, not only in her own life—but

in that of her readers, who themselves are transformed in their thinking about Leila and conceptions of race as Leila's words resonate with them. hooks (1994) writes:

Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the ways knowledge is shared in the classroom. It forces us all to recognize our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind. Students are eager to break through barriers to knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain. When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. (pp. 44)

The ways in which participants wrote to transcend racial labels in this study exemplify the breaking of barriers hooks writes about. To "surrender to the wonder of re-learning" is to give all students a powerful opportunity to transcend current ways of thinking. Including multiracial perspectives in the classroom allows for a transcendent problematizing of colorblind assumptions that are unchallenged, in part, because they are unspoken.

Beyond Transcendence: Transformation

When Kya's final interview concluded, she thanked me for allowing her to participate. She noted that this project was the highlight of her semester.

After his first interview, David sat at the large mahogany table between us, still appearing deep in thought. "That's the longest I've ever talked to anyone about race before," he commented, before standing to shake my hand.

"I don't want to go," Emma stated in the middle of her interview. So she didn't. She found more of her writing that she wanted to discuss.

Many of the participants in this study expressed satisfaction at having been given the opportunity to share their writing, to discuss their experiences, and to dialogue with

me about what it means to be a multiracial person in a monoracial world. “That was one of the best interviews I’ve done ever in my life,” Taylor emailed me, going on to thank me for “sitting and listening” to her. At the conclusion of his member-check process, Michael texted me, noting that reading about himself was “satisfying” because no one had ever written about him before. As was previously mentioned, he reached out to me by text yet again a few months later, this time just to chat about race.

This research mattered to the participants. They felt that they were being given a voice.

As I sit here thinking about how I see all of the findings of this study as important to teachers of all students: Selectivity—in what ways are we all selective in representing ourselves in writing for particular tasks and in particular contexts?—engaging in overt racial identity work—something White students should be taught to do, as well (McIntosh, 1988; Tatum, 1997; McLaren, 2015)—and transcendence, I find myself most thinking about transcendence. These nine women and men have had reason to question and transcend racial labels, reasons that most of the monoracial majority of us do not navigate with the same urgency in our daily lives. Of course race matters in the lives of monoracial people of color, and of course we should all question assumptions that we hold about others, racially influenced and otherwise—but for multiracial individuals, these negotiations with race are often daily, lived challenges that they cannot separate from other aspects of their identities. In listening to the nine students I interviewed describe the ways they wrote about or chose not to write about these navigations, I admired the ability that some had acquired to negotiate racial labels, proclaiming one identity in favor of another as they adopted to different environments. I

noted that the struggles they faced differed according to context, as other aspects of their identities became more or less important to them as they wrote in various spaces. I rejoiced when many of them shared views of their multiraciality as advantageous and positive in numerous ways, breathing a sigh of relief that perhaps by the time my oldest daughter reaches emergent adulthood, and the younger approaches her teenage years, my girls may have opportunities to write in a world that doesn't always insist on drawing lines between Black and White.

I feel that “transcendental” is a fitting adjective for my participants, both in terms of their racial identities, their writing identities, and the many other aspects of self they choose to embrace and showcase through various composing practices. None of the men or women in this study are just one thing, not in their writing, not in their lives. Nor are any of us just one thing, even if we only claim membership to one race. Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) argues that modern America’s increased attention to mixed-race identity oversimplifies the intricacy of multiracial identity politics in favor of adopting a romanticized version of positive and harmonious race-relations symbolism. I understand her concern, and do not wish my work to misrepresent the often complicated and sometimes painful identity work my participants engaged in. I also do not wish to suggest that by virtue of achieving healthy racial identities, multiracial young people represent a Messianic hope for America’s troubled current race relations. But I do believe in the power of research to transform, and I do believe that the transcendence exercised by Leila, Emma, and Taylor illustrates a desire that many monoracial Americans also wish to participate in. Again, let me not be misunderstood: in praising participants’ transcendence, I do not mean to argue that we are post-racial, or that we can

pretend that racism no longer exists in America. Turner (2012) describes this argument as he saw it unfolding after the election of Barrack Obama:

The insistence that America is “postracial” occurs in the overwhelming social scientific evidence that racial prejudice and discrimination persist, and that the legal racial segregation of yesterday leaves a dramatic legacy of racial inequality of opportunity today. Purveyors of the gospel of race’s diminishing significance often preach in the name of American individualism: the solution of racial inequality is black and brown self-uplift, and the cure for racism is a practice of colorblindness in which we stop talking about race and treat each other “just as individuals.” (pp. 1)

I agree with Turner’s assessment of the danger of perpetuating colorblind narratives, and view participants’ desires to transcend racial labels as representative of the fatigue and the frustration they feel with America’s obsession over racial categorization, rather than as intentional conformity to values that reinforce White supremacist ideology. In choosing the word “transcendence” to describe the ways participants used composing practices to reject categorization, I consulted several dictionaries and read various definitions such as “existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level,” (Google Dictionary), “exceeding usual limits: surpassing,” (Merriam-Webster), and “the act of rising above something to a superior state” (Vocabulary.com). I believe it is obvious that these definitions show the disconnection between participants’ clear desires and their lived realities. Transcendence suggests the impossible, and even in participants’ literal transcendence of monoraciality, our flawed society that constantly demands to know, “What are you?” illustrates the insurmountable barriers that stand between them and transcendence, even as their multiple racial heritages defy traditional modes of racial categorization.

Nevertheless, though racial transcendence may be an unrealistic desire, it remains a pursuit worth working for, and a reminder that we cannot be satisfied with the progress

we have made. In this way, I see this research as transformative. By the conclusion of her involvement in the study, Kya shared with me that she was carefully and regularly posting her opinion regarding racial controversies on social media—something that, in the past, she had refrained from doing. According to Kya, her coworkers are all White, many of them are conservative, and Kya felt that many of them were unsympathetic to the plight of people of color. When she first informed me that she was beginning to share her views, my immediate reaction was fear: Kya works in a professional office, what if her views offended her supervisor? Could her social media posts cost her her job? What if she had been wise to abstain from participating in politically charged conversations on social media, and what if my study caused her to make a decision she would later regret?

Kya assured me that she was still exercising discretion in her composing practices, though she did note that when she first began sharing videos and links examining police brutality, it made for a few tense interactions in the workplace. People who normally “liked” her posts weren’t liking them now that she had become more political in her writing. Some of her coworkers were, on their own pages, posting content that was oppositional to the views that Kya had begun expressing, seemingly in response to Kya, from the way she described the situation in her interview.

But, Kya told me, she’d also made a connection with someone in her workplace who held some similar views. In being brave enough to use her position as a woman of color to draw attention to some of the racial injustices she saw around her, she found a new ally in her White workplace. This conversation would, most likely, not have occurred if not for Kya’s involvement in this research, which inspired her to consider what might happen if she did add her own voice to the national conversation about race in

her own local context. This illustrates the power of transcendence to not only move beyond racial labels, but to cross from a place of silence to one in which voices are discovered and heard. Furthermore, Kya's case shows how composing practices are transformative not only for authors, but for readers. Such compositions can gradually establish a groundwork for transforming others, as in the example of Kya's co-worker, who Kya said initiated a critical conversation that otherwise would not have happened in their workplace.

Upon the conclusion of the study, Kya had also decided to submit poetry to the community college's literary magazine, she had begun attending meetings of the magazine's editorial board, and she set a goal for herself to continue to pursue her interests in writing.

These feats, no doubt, will sometimes be uncomfortable. As often as Kya is likely to experience satisfaction at having made her voice heard through writing, as often as it is probable that her opinion will be validated by others who praise her courage in speaking up, as often as she is to sense positive changes regarding race relations—

As often as all that happens, Kya is perhaps just as likely to wonder if she did the right thing when she placed her fingers to the keyboard, she is bound to face disgruntled opponents who will seek to dispute her views, she is, on many days, practically guaranteed to think that the racial lines that divide us will remain intact, that the progress that is made is too little and often too late.

In many ways, the struggles Kya and other participants will face as they continue to engage in racial identity work through composing practices are similar to those that we educators will encounter as we strive to create classrooms in which students' personal

identities are valued, and as we attempt to structure assignments that will allow young people to engage in identity work that matters to them. At times, we will not understand our students. We will surely face moments of exasperation as we encounter opinions we find uninformed, judgments we feel are insensitive, worldviews that differ from our own. But as we continue to provide opportunities for students to critically question the world around them, we can respond to Newkirk's (1997) invitation to "learn about culture from the stories students tell," (p. 106) and remember that college courses are ideological spaces which "can be expanded or contracted... if we are to learn about culture from our students, it follows that we need a space big enough for a diversity of forms of self-representation" (p. 107).

Such spaces can and should include multiracial voices whenever such students feel the need or desire to use writing to type their way out of the margins and share how their experiences crossing, blending, or transcending multiple racial identities might help others to better understand the limitations of a society that assumes monoraciality and focuses on racial differences. More than that, though, such spaces should cultivate transcendence: Not by perpetuating narratives of colorblindness, even if they are well intentioned. Instead, transcendence should be encouraged through critically drawing attention to the ways our racial and other identities privilege us or not in different contexts and recognizing how those identities impact the way we present ourselves to others through our creation of various texts. We must always allow for reinterpretations of the world in which we write. Most importantly, we should be willing and able to rewrite ourselves into our ever-evolving understandings of that world accordingly.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A**Recruitment Flier**

Are your parents from two or more different racial backgrounds, and do you consider yourself biracial or multiracial?

Are you between the ages of 18 and 25?

Are you enrolled in at least one course that requires you to write essays or other written assignments?

If you answered yes to all of the above questions and would like to participate in a research study that allows you to discuss how you engage in identity work in and out of class, email [RESEARCHER'S EMAIL] for more information!

Appendix B**Recruitment Email**

Attention All Students,

- Are your parents from two or more different racial backgrounds, and do you consider yourself biracial or multiracial?
- Are you between the ages of 18-25?
- Are you enrolled in at least one course that requires you to write essays or other written assignments?
- Would you like to earn \$20 in gift cards for sharing your writing and talking about your experiences?

If you answered yes to all of the above questions, please respond to this email to learn how you can participate in a literacy study about identity work in and out of the college classroom. Hurry, the study begins this September!

To find out more or to sign up today, click reply and send your name and phone number to Jenny McFadden, or call her at [PHONE NUMBER]. Thanks!

Jenny McFadden
Doctoral Student Researcher

Appendix C

Consent Form

Title of Study: Composing Practices of Multiracial Emergent Adult College Students:
Expressions of Identity

Introduction

Hello! My name is Jenny McFadden, and I am a doctoral student in Kensington University's Ed.D program. I am conducting a research study to examine the ways that multiracial emergent students express, explore or reject identities through writing and other composing practices. I am pleased that you are interested in participating.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to study your beliefs about how you assert identities through writing and other literacy practices in classrooms and school assignments, social media contexts, and other recreational literacy activities. I am interested in learning how you position yourselves in writing and other literacy practices as well as how you feel positioned by others.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in the study, I will ask you to participate in two interviews. For each interview, I will ask you to bring four texts to discuss: two you wrote for school, and two you wrote/constructed for recreational purposes. I will also ask you to track and record your literacy activities for one week, and to write a written reflection at the end of that week. This will be brought to your final interview for us to discuss.

Benefits

By participating in this research, you will receive the opportunity to reflect on your own identity work through your composing practices. You may learn more about yourself and your literacies in the process.

Risks/Discomforts

You may experience emotional distress since talking about racial issues can be a potentially sensitive topic. Should you feel uncomfortable with an interview question, you can skip that question; you can also end an interview at your discretion. Should you decide that the study is too distressing, you will be free to end your involvement at any time. Should you wish to continue the study or not, if you feel you need support because of your involvement in this study, you may reach Kensington University's counseling center at [PHONE NUMBER]. You may also visit a biracial support group on Facebook located at <https://www.facebook.com/biracialhelp/>. Additionally, the County Behavioral Health services offer a Minority Youth Outreach Program; their website says they "promote behavioral health and awareness through education and outreach to youth and adults of all ages, genders, and nationalities." They can be reached at [PHONE NUMBER} or accessed on their website at [WEB ADDRESS].

Similarly, you may decide you no longer want to participate in the study for any other number of reasons, such as lack of interest, time, or other commitments. If this is the case, you can discontinue your involvement with this study at any time, and you may specify that I can or cannot use the data you provided for presentations/publications before you chose to leave the project.

Confidentiality

You will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used to reference any of your contributions to this project, whether shared in a publication or conference presentation. You should be aware that sharing texts with me from your social media writing may result in someone being able to search for a direct quote, which, depending on your privacy settings, may in turn lead to someone realizing who you are. Please exercise discretion in selecting texts or verify that your privacy settings prevent unwanted strangers from viewing your information if this is a concern to you.

Rights

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may opt to discontinue participation at any time and for any reason. Your participation is extremely valuable and will help the literacy community better understand composing practices as a means for navigating identity for multiracial emergent adults.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study or would be interested in the results, please contact [RESEARCHER'S NAME & CONTACT INFORMATION].

Also, you may contact Kensington University's Office of Graduate Studies & Research about any concerns you have in regards to this research, at [PHONE NUMBER]. Thanks for your cooperation; I look forward to working with you!

Consent Form

Title of Study: Composing Practices of Multiracial Emergent Adult College Students:
Expressions of Identity

A copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records.
If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below.

Your name: _____

Your signature: _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Instructions for Participants for Selecting Writing Samples

Thank you again for your participation! For **both** of your interviews, you need to bring the following with you:

Two examples of texts that you have written for one or more of your courses.

Two examples of texts that you have written for any other purpose than school.

The focus of our study is on identity, so it may be helpful for you to try and select texts that you feel tell or show the reader something important about you. If you are not sure that the texts you have available do this, don't worry—any texts are fine. I am especially interested in talking about race, so if you are able to include any examples that address racial topics, that would be wonderful. (If you don't have any of these, don't worry. Bring whatever you have.)

You may bring physical (print) or electronic copies of your selections. I will make copies of any print copies you share with me, and I will print and/or save any electronic samples to a flash drive. A computer will be provided for you to access if you plan on pulling your social media example(s) up to show me when you arrive. Please make sure you can easily access the texts you want to show me. I will be using the screenshot function of my computer to save any examples that I cannot save on a flash drive.

Appendix E

Semi-structured Interview Protocols

Script to be read before each interview: Hi, and thanks for coming. Just as a reminder, you are being recorded right now. If you are uncomfortable with any question, you may skip it. You may also feel free to end the interview at any time. Before publishing anything you share with me, you will be assigned a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview 1

1. Please give your name, age, and major here at (Name of College).
2. Please describe your racial background.
3. What classes are you currently taking this semester? Which are you enjoying, and why? Which are you not enjoying, and why?
4. Please describe your writing habits outside of school.
 5. Please describe the kinds of writing that you do in your courses.
 6. Please describe your social media activities.
 7. What ways do you think you represent who you are to your instructors and/or classmates?
 8. What ways do you express yourself through writing that you do for class?
 9. What ways do you express yourself through writing that you do outside of class?
 10. What ways do you express who you are through your posts and writing on social media?
11. Do you ever read about, write about, or talk about race, in class? How do those activities make you feel?
12. Do you ever write about or talk about race here on campus outside of the classroom? If so, describe.
13. Do you ever write about or talk about race in the local community outside of school? If so, describe. (If needed, prompt: At home? With friends? At social events? Church?)
14. Do you ever write about race online? If so, describe. If not, why not?
15. Race has received a lot of attention nationwide as of lately. In what ways has that impacted the way you think about yourself or those around you? Do you use writing to explore or express these opinions? If so, describe. If not, why not?
16. Let's look at one of the texts you wrote for class. What, if anything, do you think this text says about you? What do you hope readers will understand about you when they read it? Did you enjoy writing it? Why or why not? Is there anything else you want to tell me about this text? (Repeat for other school-based text shared).
17. Let's look at one of the texts you wrote outside of school. Who was your audience for this text? Why did you write it? What do you think this text says about you? What do you want the readers to understand about you? Did you enjoy writing it? Why or why not? *(If wrote for social media): How did others react to this text?

Did you expect them to react that way? Is there anything else you want to tell me about this text? (Repeat for other recreational text shared).

18. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me today, about your identity, your writing practices, or your experiences here on campus?

Interview Two

1. What kinds of writing have you done since we last spoke?
2. Talk to me about the Identity Reflection. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself, or about the writing or digital literacy practices that you engage in?
3. Let's look at one of the texts you wrote for class. What, if anything, do you think this text says about you? What do you hope readers will understand about you when they read it? Did you enjoy writing it? Why or why not? Is there anything else you want to tell me about this text? (Repeat for other school-based text shared).
4. Let's look at one of the texts you wrote outside of school. Who was your audience for this text? Why did you write it? What do you think this text says about you? What do you want the readers to understand about you? Did you enjoy writing it? Why or why not? *(If wrote for social media): How did others react to this text? Did you expect them to react that way? Is there anything else you want to tell me about this text? (Repeat for other recreational text shared).
5. I now have some follow-up questions for you based on our last interview. Please tell me (INSERT NEW INTERVIEW QUESTIONS BASED ON INTERVIEW 1).
6. How did school go for you this semester?
7. Do you feel that your racial identity comes up often here on campus? What about in the assignments or writing that you do here?
8. Do you feel that your racial identity comes up often outside of campus? Do you ever write in ways that make you question the way you or those around you think about race?
9. How do you think your being multiracial effects the way you see the world?
10. Does being multiracial impact your experiences here at school? If so, in what ways?

Appendix F

Instructions for Completing Written Reflection

To complete the written reflection, please do the following:

- Select at least one week to keep track of your composing practices. On a **daily** basis (so as not to miss anything), please keep track of your literacy habits in the following chart. You may complete this activity by hand, or, if you prefer, an electronic version will be emailed to you. You should include all relevant activities completed for school or personal reasons. Other Composing Practices can include uploading photographs or sharing links online, class presentations, engaging in artwork, or anything that you think has to do with creating a text of any kind (if you think it counts, it probably does).
- At the end of the week, please respond to the questions beneath the chart in writing. Please write in complete sentences, in a word document, or on a separate sheet if you prefer to write by hand. Your answers don't have to be long, but try to make sure they are thoughtful!
- If you would like, complete a new reflection for one (or more) additional week(s). **Please complete at least one reflection, and please complete it before your final interview.**
- Don't forget, you also need to bring four more texts (two written for school, two written outside of school—at least one of which showcases your social media activity) to your final interview.

Identity Reflection Journal

Day of the Week	All Writing Activities for School	All Writing Activities Outside of School	Other Composing Practices
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

1. Did any of the activities listed above impact how you think about yourself or the world around you? Explain.
2. In the writing you completed this week, what did you express about yourself to others? Which writing activities allowed you to do so?

3. Do you think any of the writing you completed for school showed something about yourself to anyone who read it? If so, what?
4. Did any of the composing practices listed above allow you to communicate or explore racial identity? If so, which ones, and how?
5. Did you learn anything about yourself doing this activity? If so, what?