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On Being White in America:

An Exploration of Identity in the Ethnic Majority

By

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On Being White in America: An Exploration of Identity in the Ethnic Majority

Thesis Committee Chairperson: Greg Campbell

This research project, conducted on the University of Montana campus, is a qualitative study of identity in the ethnic majority. Twenty interviews were conducted over a yearlong period, with informants representing Americans of mixed or unknown European ancestry. Generally, they are at least four generations removed from their ancestral continent, and consequently, have little or no affinity for their European heritage. In order to elicit responses expressive of ethnic identity, informants were asked questions about their experiences and thoughts related to the topics of ethnicity, heritage, and race.

Multiculturalism and more specifically, multicultural education proved to be the common theme in the lives of these university students, both of which had great impact on their identities and sense of ethnicity. Multiculturalism is a political movement guided by an ideology that encourages immigrants and ethnic minorities to retain their own cultures; and it encourages all Americans to appreciate and respect social differences. Multicultural education involves teaching about the traditions and achievements of non-Western cultures, along with the conventional curriculum, which is often criticized for being Eurocentric.

Experiencing multiculturalism in school and society at large, these university students have developed a dislike for whiteness and the American national identity. The criticisms made of Euro-American history and the challenges made toward White hegemony, have produced feelings of guilt and shame in many young members of the ethnic majority. These feelings, added to the fact that they are removed from their European heritage through intermarriage and generations, produce an identity crisis for many young, White Americans. While not denying that they are racially White or culturally American, these informants, representative of White college students in the United States, actively seek identity forms they can be proud of, identities that offer them the illusion of being apart from the ethnic majority.
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Chapter 1
Introduction and Literature Review

"Du Bois said begin with art because art tries to take us outside of ourselves. It's a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and a context so conversation can flow back and forth, and we can be influenced by each other." - Cornel West 1996

Introduction: Race

When Americans think about the concept of race, notions of segregation and prejudice most often come to mind. The very word, race, makes some people feel uneasy. For most Americans, it stirs the emotions and turns thoughts toward our society's racist traditions. This is entirely understandable, as the term race implies biological or genetic uniqueness, throughout much of Western history. The concept so defined, has "justified" the oppression of various groups by the mostly White power structure in the United States. It has had lingering effects, as prejudice and discrimination remain social problems.

Race, a nineteenth century invention, had been at the forefront of many early anthropological studies with the goal of categorizing and understanding humans' biological differences. Currently, scholars know that race is not a fact of nature. It is merely a sociological construct marked by superficial phenotypic differences. This realization did not come soon enough. As we can observe throughout the country, the concept of 'race' continues to encourage racism, the belief that humans are inherently different in social and intellectual capacities. Given the fact that racism is behind much of America's social injustices, many people feel we should disregard the concept altogether. Such people would argue that the very recognition of the concept perpetuates prejudice. However, to do so would be to ignore the very real impact it has on people's
lives. Instead, we should, as a discipline, redefine the terms and view the concepts from fresh perspectives.

Many of today’s scholars and social critics say that essentialist understandings of difference remain at the heart of all types of discriminations. However, it is altogether possible that society on the whole has come to see race differently and as scholars, so should we. Ruth Frankenberg points out in her book, *White Women, Race Matters*, that starting in the 1920s, race came to be understood in social rather than biological terms. Particularly in the 1950s and 60s, Civil Rights leaders propagated the notion of color-blindness. Frankenberg calls this color evasion, whereby people suppress or deny the differences race makes in people’s lives. Instead, under this line of thinking, people promote the idea of essential sameness - “we are all alike under our skins” (Frankenberg 1993:140-148).

Another phase that Frankenberg describes is race cognizance, whereby people reassert racial differences. Sparked by cultural renewal movements of the 1960s and 70s, Americans realized the importance of recognizing racial differences. However, rather than differentiate in essentialist terms, they began to differentiate according to varying historical and cultural circumstances. Currently, color evasion and race cognizance are occurring simultaneously, within different generations of Americans. They include essentialist beliefs, as the phases overlap. However, they are clearly an outgrowth of them. We can see this in her informants’ insistence that they don’t recognize biological differences of race, as well as through their conscious acts of distancing themselves from essentialism by shunning it (ibid: 156-157).

Races are socially defined categories, although ambiguously, that serve to mark ‘differences’ amongst Americans. The type of racism that this encourages is one that involves prejudice against those who are thought to have socially inherited characteristics that set them apart. This is not one-sided however. It cannot be. As one believes in inherent differences in the ‘Other’, (s)he believes in inherent differences in the self,
although this may not be consciously recognized. These categories shape the lives of people according to imbalances of power and wealth. It is both externally imposed and generated from within social groups (Jenkins 1997:55,80-81). Race then, is a condition of individual and collective identity that is a means of understanding the social world. In the United States, where there has been a persistent social understanding of racial distinctions, it seems difficult for people to relinquish the concept when viewing ‘Others’. This has an inevitable effect upon the identities of the individual of any racial group, as (s)he cannot recognize the ‘Other’ without contrasting the members of the group(s) in question to themselves.

While notions of race and racism are most often imposed by outside forces, they can also stem from individual identity, which is created subjectively. However, for many, just the mention of the word “race” and its subsequent labels puts people of all social groups on the defensive. It seems that many people believe that if they acknowledge racial differences, it indicates racism within themselves. However, as long as Americans perceive others according to racial categories, they will continue to understand themselves racially to varying degrees as well. Therefore, simply mentioning race does not indicate a racist mind. Rather, it indicates a mind affected by an environment in which the concept of race exists. So, the rejection of the concept would be to ignore a significant social issue. It is perhaps more important for us to consider how we can channel our emotions more effectively. We could redefine the terms and challenge our own perspectives. However we go about it, we need to rebuild the discourse. We may never be comfortable with the concept of race, but it’s significance demands we explore it. But how do we move to this level? The answer lies in a well known, yet commonly misunderstood concept - ethnicity.
Ethnicity

Because racial groups are set apart by a consciousness of difference, there is an implicit understanding of distinct histories and cultures. Ethnicity is often defined in the same way, although encompassing a wider reach in that its boundary markers surpass the phenotypic. Nevertheless, the different races in the United States can be viewed as constituting different ethnic groups. Like ethnicity, races are both products of historical social processes and present cultural realities. As ethnic groups, races are understood to have descended from distinct groups of ancestors and so, have socially evolved along distinct cultural paths with specific traditions and social experiences. An outgrowth of large-scale, complex societies, ethnic groups coexist, most often competitively.

Abner Cohen is a proponent of the resource-competition model to explain ethnic group formation. He says that in a complex economic system, competition over resources is inevitable. As competition increases, interest groups form. These groups become ethnicities, as they develop distinctive organizational functions including communication, ideology, and socialization, which respond to their environmental conditions (Williams 1989:405). However, resource-competition models are not entirely adequate, as they ignore groups' conceptions of themselves.

Ronald Cohen suggests that ethnic groups value ideological and cultural uniqueness for reasons beyond resource-exploitation advantages. To him, the fact that conscious efforts are made to maintain equity between groups, indicates that ethnic group formation is not based on power relations alone (ibid: 417-418). While politico-economic dynamics certainly impact upon the cultural distinctiveness of social groups, looking at R. Cohen's examples it is easy to see that theories of ethnicity must include analysis of the cultural formulations of group identities, as well as the material motivations.

One thing I've realized, with all of the reading I've done is that the term
‘ethnicity’ is used in different ways. For some scholars, it is a term used to strictly indicate common ancestral origin. Stanley Lieberson for example, uses this definition in his studies of ethnic groups in America. His quantitative method of research with census records necessitates it (Leiberson 1986:79-91). Others understand the term to connote group affiliation and cultural identity. For many people, it means both. However, I believe awareness of ancestry is not a prerequisite for ethnic identity. One can be part of an ethnic group without the knowledge of a shared history. All that is required are common interests and social experience.

Because individuals have numerous interests, they can have more than one group affiliation. Identities are as complex as the environments in which they exist, so ethnicities frequently overlap. A person for instance, can be a part of an Italian-American ethnicity, making him or her distinct from other Americans in terms of tradition and cultural history. This same person may also be a part of a regional identity. If, for example, (s)he was raised in “the South”, there would be a distinction from people in other American regions that are perceived to differ by way of lifestyle and values. In this same way, race can produce ethnic affiliation. When race is the major identity component marking differences between people, race is the basis for an ethnic group. While it is true that different racial groups consist of multiple ethnicities, race is the form ethnicity takes when people are set apart by racial difference, involuntary or not. Phenotypic differences then, as anthropologist James Watson agrees, are only one of many possible criteria that can serve as the basis for ethnic divisions (Banks 1996:100).

**Origins of the ‘White’ Ethnicity**

Not many nations have the prominent racial distinctions that America has. Here, races are popularly distinguished by phenotypic differences, namely skin color. It is an easily recognizable way to differentiate people socially. Ethnic distinctions tend to
develop according to regional and economic competition in most societies. America however, has had the “peculiar” history of slavery and segregation, due to the massive influxes of immigration, both forced and voluntary that has added the race factor to ethnic development. It is widely agreed by many scholars that rather than racism causing slavery, they generated each other.

As early as the 15th Century, the concept of “whiteness” began to materialize as Europeans explored, conquered, and colonized. It was a self-conscious social category, manifested through comparison with peoples who were different. Such categorization is inevitable as societies come together or clash. As Marvin Harris has said, “Ethnocentrism is a universal feature of intergroup relations” (Allen 1994:7). Race in and of itself has little to do with the European arrogance. It is because in the particular situation of Europeans invading non-Europeans, who just so happened to have darker skin, did racism become the form that ethnocentrism took.

As Europeans colonized North America, something occurred that instigated further development of racial categories. Besides the oppression of Native American populations was the creation of a system of chattel slavery. The new Euro-American government wanted control over the land and its resources. Once they got it, they needed to build towns and develop an agricultural economy so that their new nation would flourish. Slavery was nothing new to the world. Like others before them, Euro-Americans enslaved a group of people for cheap labor. Since there was no deep-seated bias against the institution, and because Africans were physically vulnerable to enslavement, they were the likely choice. To quote Harris again, “Negroes were not enslaved because the British colonists specifically despised dark-skinned peoples and regarded them alone as properly suited to slavery; the Negroes came to be the object of virulent prejudices because they alone could be enslaved” (Frederickson 1988:194-195).

So as can be seen, there was a delayed development of White superiority. Rather than racism causing slavery, it is generally agreed among scholars that they generated
each other. Some offer psycho-cultural analysis. Winthrop D. Jordan for instance, explains that the development of "whiteness" was a defense mechanism. The Euro-Americans were immigrants in an alien land and experiencing unfamiliar cultural conditions. In order to survive says Jordon, they needed to know who they were. "Whiteness" then, was the identity form that replaced their former and no longer applicable European ones (Allen 1994:9-10). Theodore Allen however, feels that such an explanation is inadequate. Socio-economic analysis is much stronger. For him, the invention of the White race was a political act. Euro-Americans needed social control to maintain authority. They used the 'superiority' of the White race to command and regulate the Black populace (ibid: 22-24). Unlike European nations where class provided the framework for social order, colonial America was structured according to race.

Budding industry and political divisions of antebellum America brought class distinctions to the surface. Republicans and Democrats alike, appealed to White laborers by espousing the need for White protection. Republicans saw White "enslavement" if the institution of Black slavery continued. The non-slaveholding majority of the South had to overthrow the controlling slaveholding class in order to succeed financially (Fredrickson 1988:41). Democrats saw it differently. They foresaw job competition with Blacks and so wage decreases upon emancipation – thus, a life similar to slavery. Both viewpoints put the fear in the minds of White workers that they were up against a non-white foe (Roediger 1991:170-171).

While whiteness was a clearly understood concept by the onset of the Civil War, not all European descendents in America were considered "White". Irish-Americans are a prime example, as "Irishman" and "Nigger " were almost synonymous during the antebellum period. This is because they had similar histories of oppression and lived and worked close together in American slums (Allen 1994:182). Fleeing from famine, Irish came in droves during the 19th century. Due to their desperation and rural backgrounds, they took America's most laborious, unskilled, and therefore lowest paid jobs. This put
the Irish and Blacks in the same playing field. Job competition such as this is perhaps the most frequently given reason for working-class racism, particularly amongst the Irish. The Democratic Party encouraged this. Politicians emphasized the “natural roots of White men”, putting the Irish and other poor Whites into the majority population (Roediger 1991:133-150).

Throughout the 19th century, America became more and more industrialized with the growth of the capitalist labor market. This economic system seemed to undermine the core principles upon which White republican liberty was based. There were great declines of independence in the workplace. Instead of producing a society of self-reliant farmers and craftsmen among Whites, the new industrial system produced mass dependency upon factory jobs that entailed confinement, strict discipline, and low wages (ibid: 67-85). The comparison of their jobs to slavery, as well as the fear of job competition, encouraged the growing sense of whiteness, which united the diversity of the White, working-class. Something in the realm of the subjective aids in the creation of race. It was a response, says Roediger, “to a fear of dependency of the wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline”. He uses Max Weber to support this claim. As Weber has said, whiteness was used by poor, working-class Whites to make up for the alienation and exploitation brought on by low class status (ibid: 12-13).

**Recent Studies of Whiteness**

Through their interrelationships, racial groups, as ethnic groups, define and redefine each other and themselves. As alliances, racial groups generate their own sense of identities as they compare themselves to those with whom they compete for resources. It is also important to note that to varying degrees, different groups impose upon the identities of each other. Ethnic majorities, those groups with the most control over a societies’ resources, have the greatest influence. Because of this, they are said to impose
upon the identities of ethnic minorities far more than the minority groups affect the majority.

In the United States, as elsewhere, there is a dominant ethnic group that, in a sense, presides over ethnic minorities. This dominant group is comprised of people of European ancestry, commonly identified as “White”. It is a socially constructed racial category that is marked by particular phenotypic traits and disproportionately high access to wealth and power. Because White Americans make up the dominant ethnic group, they are held as the standard, by which other groups are contrasted. The quality of the “normal”, which whiteness symbolizes, has produced little academic interest to analyze it as a racial category. However, race and ethnicity are not restricted to minority groups. White people are racialized like everyone else in America. Whiteness, just as non-white racial concepts, has been historically constructed through social, economic, and political forces. It, like other ethnic identities, is composed of shared attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. It has substance that generates norms and ways of understanding. When ignored, whiteness is naturalized, seemingly vindicating it’s dominance and giving it a quality of changelessness (Frankenberg 1993:196-200).

Since there has been little deconstruction of the whiteness concept, there has remained a common conception of a monolithic “White” people. The White majority in America is often called White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) or simply, Anglos. However, not all Americans of European descent fit into this one neat category, which is defined as, “a member of the English people” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997). As one young man remarked to me, when I interviewed him for this project, “I can’t call myself WASP, just because I don’t practice a Protestant religion or align myself with any culture other than the United States.” Again and again, he, like others, feels this category is improperly imposed upon him. It is difficult to apply this outdated term to much of White America, especially since non-Protestants are now members of the ethnic majority, as well as because it is divided by various interdependent factors. Economic levels,
political interests, religious affiliations, and, crucial to this era of rediscovering our "roots", ancestries, divide White Americans. Moreover, since the term holds little or no meaning for many White Americans, it proves unhelpful when asking questions of identity.

Many Whites have a specific Euro-connected ethnic identity. Such people have an affinity for European national identities. Labels such as Italian-American and Irish-American reveal Americans’ connections to their European ancestors and homelands. They may relate to a European group by way of tradition, as well as, perhaps to the current social experiences of people of the same heritage. They define their own identities accordingly, producing ethnic divisions within the White population. Yet, the growing numbers of Whites who do not identify with any specific European origins also share a commonality. Their experience in the whiteness construct puts them into the dominant group ethnicity.

America is well known as a country of immigrants. Millions, representing people from every part of the world populate it. People of European descent form the largest group. They have been arriving on this continent for well over five hundred years. Through the generations, groups have inevitably grown that no longer have any connections to their European ancestry. They cannot, as easily as some, label themselves with a European-American title, nor can they fit under the ever-popular Anglo-Saxon. To some, it may seem reasonable that they simply be called Americans. Yet, the term “American” is wrought with ambiguity and contention. So where do these de-Europeanized people fit in to the great ethnic jigsaw puzzle that is America? Surely there must be something more than ‘whiteness’.

Ruth Frankenberg is one researcher who studies ‘whiteness’ in its present conditions. Through the life-history method, she has constructed a personal view of White identity. She found that many of America’s White people find it difficult to identify with their ancestral heritage; yet, ethnic identity is increasingly important to
Americans. As multiculturalism has grown in popularity, people have been learning to appreciate cultural diversity. Ethnic minorities are unifying and empowering themselves, as they celebrate their own histories with great enthusiasm. For many White Americans, this poses a problem. Their European roots are often blurred by fusion of mixed ancestries, and their histories as Americans are tainted with shameful racist ideologies, causing feelings of guilt and confusion. This is making a serious impact on White identity. Some of those Frankenberg interviewed felt that “whiteness” or “White Americaness” is bad because of its undesirable links with systems of oppression. One woman Frankenberg interviewed, most clearly exhibited this sentiment when she said, “I hate identifying myself as only an American, because I have so much objections to Americans’ place in the world... Especially growing up in the sixties, when people did say ‘I’m proud to be Black’, ‘I’m proud to be Hispanic”, you know, and it became very popular to be proud of your ethnicity. But there’s still a majority of the country that can’t say they are proud of anything!” (Frankenberg 1993:194-195).

The sense of whiteness is also called into question in regards to its cultural content. From her interviews, Frankenberg found that whiteness is popularly linked with capitalism; and non-whiteness is closer to the “traditional”, the cultural. While ethnic minorities (i.e., “people of color”) enjoy cultural activities and behaviors outside of America’s mainstream, White Americans see themselves as career-oriented, net surfing, Burger King-eating, mall rats - slaves to technology and capitalism. Consequently, they feel cultureless, divorced from a specific cultural identity. Some women even went so far as to say they had no culture at all. Frankenberg attributes this to the women’s presence in the neutral category. The women most clearly exhibited this when they made comparisons of themselves with non-white people. For instance, they would refer to popular American music as “regular music” when comparing it to things like “Mexican music” or rap. Frankenberg defines this neutral category, saying that White culture is “a residual, normative space that, as far as most of its inhabitants are concerned, has no
name and few distinguishing marks and thus is not apparently, a cultural space” (Frankenberg 1993:228). While whiteness is often hard for White people to identify beyond its place in the power structure, it definitely shapes White people’s experiences and perceptions of themselves and others.

Among her observations, Frankenberg recognized that White Americans had an easier time identifying “those parts of themselves and their daily practices that are least close to the center of power . . . thus expressing whiteness as a relational category” (ibid: 229). There are people who see themselves as having ethnic identities independent of their racial identities or perhaps even in conjunction with whiteness. They are the ones who are able to connect their identities to a European heritage, and so, have recognized immigrant ancestors from which they inherited distinctive qualities. However, there are numerous others who see themselves as simply White, boring in the grander multicultural scheme of things. What elements make up their identities? Are notions of heritage or a sense of community even a part of how they define themselves?

Stanley Lieberson is another scholar who has questioned the identities of this group of White Americans, but from a completely different angle. His questions are less about meaning and more about figures. Because many White Americans are unable to connect their national identity with a European heritage, unlike Italian-Americans and Irish-Americans for example, he calls them “unhyphenated Whites”. Lieberson views them as a growing ethnic group in America. He supports this claim with quantitative evidence and analysis. From surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), Lieberson found that in 1980, approximately 9.2 percent of the entire United States population reported “American” or no nationality at all when questioned about their ancestral heritage. He largely attributes this to movement away from ethnic identity by generation. About 57 percent of the United States population is at least fourth generation, and about 97 percent of those reportedly “unhyphenated Whites” were of at least fourth generation ancestry (Lieberson 1985:173-175). With successive generations,
people lose some or all of their former cultural traditions, and the amount to which they identify with the former nation(s) decreases. Part of the reason why White Americans have been losing their ancestral ties is because European immigration has decreased dramatically since the turn of the century. The lack of immigrants has meant that White Americans infrequently experience direct European influence. This has resulted in less cultural renewal for the White ethnic groups. Furthermore, Americans are increasingly prone to moving throughout the United States, and there is a decreasing tendency for White ethnic groups to segregate themselves residentially (ibid: 164,176). This is particularly significant because it has greatly increased rates of intermarriage, resulting in a confusing identity coalescence for many of the descendants.

In his analysis of White ethnic identity, Richard D. Alba, like Lieberson, had similar findings. European ethnic identities are on the decline due to an increasing population of Americans who are of fourth and later generations, the decline in ethnic neighborhoods, and high rates of intermarriage. In fact, he found in a 1980 census that three-fourths of the marriages among native-born Whites are between people of different ethnic ancestries. Intermarriage is becoming the rule rather than the exception (Alba 1990:291,307). Alba understands this to be behind the demographic trend of the decline in ethnic distinctiveness among Whites. But instead of a prominent group of "unhyphenated Whites" Alba sees a significant growth in the group he calls "European Americans".

Alba observes a great deal of value placed on ethnic origins by White Americans. The celebration of heritage by other groups stimulates Whites to think about their own ethnic history. While he recognizes the possibility of "unhyphenated Whites", Alba feels that most Americans do not define themselves in terms of a solitary national identity. More commonly, they continue to recognize their European ties to varying degrees. Alba explains that ethnic groups are classically defined by common descent. Rather than claiming one European point of origin, Whites of mixed ancestry have a shared history in
a continental, immigration sense. American children of Europeans can find a "sense of honor", a key feature in most ethnic groups, by the amalgamated image of "the immigrant". There are limitless stories of heroic immigrants who ran against the wind in their attempts to make new lives for themselves and their families. These tales and so, this history, are open to all Whites. Many claim these roots and are a part of a forming ethnic group that finds its ancestry throughout the whole European continent - European Americans (Alba 1990:290,312-313,317).

Still, there are many Americans of mixed ancestry, that are able to identify with specific European cultures. However, White ethnics, or "hyphenated Whites" as Lieberson would call them, don't contradict the European American concept, says Alba. Because Alba understands ethnicity to be a product of decent, he defines 'White ethnics' as Whites with an ethnicity distinct from a racial identity. Given this, he believes ethnic identity is most often a choice for American Whites. The lives of White ethnics don't truly resemble the ancestral culture. They are typically marked by symbols of ethnic cultures rather than cultures themselves. They could be said to be superficial, as Alba implies a certain shallowness to "ethnic" experiences among Whites. For example, people may see themselves as being ethnic by simply engaging in a heritage festival or eating ethnic foods, but the totality of their lives may not reflect the ethnic culture. Therefore, we can assume that a European-connected ethnic identity is a choice for many White Americans. The "symbolic ethnicity", explains Alba, is a result of "the desire to retain a sense of being ethnic, but without any deep commitment to ethnic social ties or behaviors" (ibid: 306).

Lieberson and Alba understand that White people of mixed and ambiguous ancestry do make up an ethnic group. More than just a singular ethnic majority, they see a group that is distinct from other White Americans they can pinpoint and define. This group descended from Europeans of various and even unknown cultures. Although this collection of ancestors is broad, they come together by way of regional origin and the
shared experience of mass emigration. While Europeans split off into different directions forming an ethnic medley across America, many went through similar historical processes of cultural vagueness which exceeded through the generations. The numbers of White Americans that don’t identify with a specific European heritage are growing, as Lieberson and Alba have tried to show. This indicates a new way for White Americans to identify themselves, and so an ethnic group has been taking shape. Perhaps it is the so-called ethnic majority transformed. Maybe it is an outgrowth of the majority. Or maybe it is the culmination of different groups that had similar social evolutions. Regardless, the status of this group as a definable ethnicity will be at the head of my discussions about people of mixed or confused European ancestry.

The concept of whiteness is not unfamiliar to scholars. While thorough analysis of this racial group has not yet occurred, it has been explored in so far as it relates to other racial and ethnic groups. Previous research has explained the position and role of the White ethnicity in America. The control Whites have over resources and the persistence of racism have been thoroughly documented, by countless members of academia and in the popular media. It seems that whiteness has most often been examined this way, when examined at all. Even the aforementioned Ruth Frankenberg couldn’t escape this critical perspective, as she consistently related what she came to learn of ‘White identity’ to the oppression of other groups. I do not deny that this is a necessary task, nor would I disagree with Frankenberg and others who have done similar research. Where I differ is in motivation. My hope is to add to the knowledge of what ‘whiteness’ is beyond, as well as within the systems of domination. Rather than explore race through the ever-popular materialist perspective, I have chosen to pursue my data in the realm of the subjective to gain a better view of the internal dynamics of the White race. With a broad understanding of historical processes and current socio-political dynamics, I have and will continue to ask questions of how people of mixed and ambiguous European ancestry define themselves. Notions of race, ethnicity, heritage,
economics, and any other significant factors that have surfaced in my research will be explored. In this way, I hope to shed some light on their state of ethnicity. Although perhaps more importantly, such a study could enhance the self-perceptions of White Americans who do suffer from guilt or confusion. It could aid them in their searches for identity and ethnic affinity, while offering a new understanding to ethnic minorities who continue to challenge the dominant ethnic culture(s). Such an investigation is integral to a thorough analysis of ‘whiteness’, which in itself will prove to be one of the necessary steps towards easing America’s ethnic and racial relations.

My hope is for readers to view this research for what it is - an analysis of White people’s thoughts and experiences, and resist weighing one group’s struggles against another’s. Pain and confusion are just that, pain and confusion, no matter if someone else’s is greater. We learn more about others and ourselves through listening and empathy, than we do through judgment and comparison. Perhaps we should all ask ourselves, as Cornel West has, “will we be able to talk about race in such a way we can get beyond the finger-pointing and name calling and actually be self-critical and critical of each other so we can be empowered and enabled instead of paralyzed and debilitated,” (West 1996:4).
Chapter 2

My Reasons and Methods

In any research project, the first step is to settle on a topic. One must decide the 'who' and 'what' will be studied. My current interests residing in the concept of ethnicity, with a particular concern for the state of whiteness in America, I chose to focus upon the group of which I am a part: people of mixed European ancestry that do not identify with a European heritage. I would analyze their state(s) of ethnicity by exploring various identity issues. Once that was settled, the next step was to plan the 'how'.

Since the project was inspired by feelings of guilt and confusion about my own place in the whiteness construct, I was attracted to the personal side of the story. With an understanding that socio-economic forces largely mold ethnic identity, and some might say entirely molded, I decided to direct my analysis toward the subjective. This approach, as well as the motivation, has always been hotly contested in the social sciences. The entire history of social science has been dominated by theories of value-free inquiry. Conventional research dictates the role of a detached observer who remains neutral and impartial, in attempts to explain the world without affecting it. Currently however, there are some scholars like Renato Rosaldo who do not believe social scientists are capable of becoming entirely detached from their subjects.

Researchers, like their subjects, have social identities that influence the questions they ask and the subsequent analysis. Therefore, subjectivity in social science could be purposely and meaningfully used. He argues "that social analysis can be done – differently, but quite validly – either from up close or from a distance, either from within or from the outside." An insider's view is just as legitimate a source of knowledge as an outsider's view. Thoughts and emotions are "lesser sources of knowledge" that are ignored in conventional social science (Rosaldo 1993:169,188, and193). The
anthropological discipline would only suffer by overlooking the knowledge to be gained from perspectives of people as they view their own conditions.

Because of my interest in the subjective, personal interviews were the best sources for my data, so ultimately the best way to go. To find informants, I constructed a questionnaire hoping it would lead me to a database representing various perspectives. I began by making a list of questions that would serve me in two ways. First, I wanted to make inquiries about ancestry and heritage that could offer me an overview of a variety of responses in the population. This would enable me to make judgments about the environment in which my group lives. Second, I needed a way to single out those who qualify for my study.

The first questions asked on the initial questionnaire were about sex and age. Answers to these questions provide a lot of information in showing if people of different sexes and ages answer differently, as well as to monitor the range of the data set. The third question, was simply “Are you mostly or all of European descent?” This was asked to give me a quick and easy way of pulling out possible informants. Unfortunately this question may have distracted my respondents, particularly those who are not White. The fourth question asks the respondents to list the nations and cultures they descended from, if known. Answers to this indicate whether they are largely of European descent and how many nations are represented in their ancestries. It also indicates any uncertainty. The fifth question asks how many generations their different ancestral lines have been in America. This provides information about the possible decrease in knowledge of their ancestral cultures over time. The sixth inquiry asked how much they identify with each of the different ancestral cultures they listed. This would help me to decide whether or not they were members of a nationality-based ethnic group. Lastly, I thanked them for filling out the form and requested names and telephone numbers from those interested in being interviewed.

Upon completion of my list, I considered the structure and content of the
questionnaire. Rather than have these open-ended questions which allowed the respondents to answer with any amount of qualitative detail, I chose to provide a choice of answers. This way the number of responses would be limited, so the data would be more manageable and less interpretation would be involved. (See appendix #1 for view of final form.)

The next step was to find people to fill out the questionnaires. I chose to do this on and around campus, which consists primarily of European descendants, from various regions and social experiences of the United States. I felt it was a prime location to find a group that could fairly represent young, White Americans. So, upon permission of some professors, I went into several large classes, gave brief presentations, and got many questionnaires filled out in short periods of time. One fear I had was that going into a class would introduce me to groups of people with similar academic interests and perspectives, cutting down on randomness. While this may have occurred, the fact that I targeted mainly introductory courses with students of varied majors, alleviates some of this concern. Also, along the way, I passed out questionnaires to people referred by friends. All respondents were students of the university.

The result of my endeavors was two hundred and thirty seven completed questionnaires, twenty-four of which were incomplete. The respondents were almost equally divided by sex. One hundred and nineteen were women, and one hundred and eighteen were men. Thirteen people had no knowledge of their heritage, making them ideal candidates, but none of them volunteered. Eighty-two people had little or no affinity for their proportionally dominant nationalities. Sixty-four respondents claimed moderate affiliation for one or more of their ancestral cultures; and fifty-four people said that they greatly identify with the proportionally dominant ancestries.

The informant profile I was looking for had certain qualities, which I sought to attain by focusing on the answers to questions four, five, and six. In question number four, I was looking for people who listed several European ancestral cultures and those
who showed uncertainty about their roots. The fifth question regarding generations wasn’t as important to finding informants as it was for the analysis of interviews. I did however take the answers into some consideration when selecting informants. Generally, I looked for those whose different family lines had been in America at least three generations. Those who answered ‘not sure’ were also considered. The answers to the sixth question weighed the most heavily. With few exceptions, my informants answered that they identify ‘very little’ or ‘not at all’ to their ancestral nationalities.

The datagroup produced consisted of twenty informants in total. Unintentionally, but perhaps fortunately, they were equally divided by sex. I arrived at these numbers simply by calling appropriate questionnaire respondents, and the first twenty people to confirm interview appointments were incorporated into the datagroup. Ten of my informants responded that they identify “very little” or “not at all” to their ancestry. Eight reported a mixture of “very little” and “moderately” for the proportionately dominant nationalities; and two people claimed “great” affinity for the dominant nationality. Answering that they have great affinity for their ancestry would have disqualified them, but these last two respondents were exceptions. One was a descendent of the non-specific “White race” to which he greatly identifies, and the other reported having great affinity for a proportionately dominant nationality, while being entirely unsure of other ancestral cultures.

In order to be most accommodating, I performed the interviews at times and places chosen by the informants. Interviews took place in their homes, my home, coffee shops, parks, - wherever they were most comfortable. I had a basic list of questions, which I brought to each interview and allowed informants to look over if they chose to. (A copy of the list can be seen in appendix #3.) I went through all of the questions with each person, but I did not limit myself to them. I took cues from my informants freely, exploring any identity issues that seemed important to them. Interviews lasted anywhere between forty-five minutes to two hours, generally depending on how much the
informants wanted to say.

One important thing I learned is that the construction of the questionnaire didn’t safeguard me against qualitative answers after all. During the interviews, I learned that interpretation was necessary, particularly regarding answers to the question of affinity towards ancestral nationalities. The question specifically asked, “How much do you identify with any of your ancestral nationalities?” I provided six lines for different ancestral lines, with the following answers: not at all; very little; moderately; and greatly. At first I was surprised by the large group of respondents who reported “moderately” and “greatly”, but after the interviewing process began, I discovered that people have their own ways of defining those words. Upon questioning, informants revealed to me that where they may have responded ‘moderately’ or ‘greatly’ to some of their ancestral ties, they were merely telling me that those are the ancestral cultures they know a lot about, not necessarily identify with through tradition and affinity. For some of Irish descent, it was just a matter of celebrating St. Patrick’s Day. For others, like those of Italian descent, it was eating a lot of spaghetti while growing up that made them feel as though they were part of an ethnic group. Some respondents, I learned, reacted to the form as though it were an exam. Rather than revealing any uncertainty, they made things up. Thus, many of the people, who wrote that they greatly identify with their ancestral cultures, may have qualified for the interviews.

Upon completion of interview transcription, I began analyzing each one. However, before I go on to describe my process, I need to relate my theoretical exploration. Early on, before I had even begun to do my literature review, numerous professors had told me that I needed a theoretical perspective, some theory that will guide me through my project. All of my peers were doing this, seemingly without question. I was troubled. I knew what questions I wanted to ask and how I wanted to do my research. I didn’t feel that I would be able to let a theory guide me. The theor(ies) would inevitably come later. Still, I was being pressed - “Choose your theory”! I figured I
better get myself a theory before I write my proposal.

Initial literature review included numerous "grand theories" of our anthropological forefathers, but none of them seemed to conform to what I hoped to do. Though there are many well-developed and well-received theories of ethnicity, I could not comfortably allow myself to be guided by preconceived ideas. Then, about half way through my data collection, I learned something that changed the way I look at doing anthropological research. It is something that has made me more comfortable about my analysis: grounded theory.

First developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded theory is a method of theory building from qualitative data. With grounded theory principles, one does not begin a research project with a preconceived theory in mind; rather s/he allows what is significant to emerge naturally. Thus, theory is generated substantively, so that it remains faithful to the research at hand. Systematic procedures must be followed to ensure grounded theory as a scientific method. Data collection and analysis should occur alternately, the analysis directing the subsequent data sampling. Grounded theory analysis involves giving data conceptual labels. Then one must find relationships between the different concepts and group them into categories, which are essentially more abstract concepts. With the categories, one can form the grounded theory paradigm model, which is much like a storyline that accounts for causal conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences for the phenomenon under examination (Strauss and Corbin 1990:23-24, 99-101).

In the next chapter, you will see grounded theory principles in action. Primarily, an inductive paradigm model serves as the form the analysis segment takes. It does not begin with abstract principles; rather, it works outward from in-depth knowledge of something tangible. The core category is the ethnic identity of my data group. It functions much like the thesis of any research paper, in that everything discussed relates to it. Its "story" begins with an exploration of causal conditions of the phenomenon and
the context in which it exists. Intervening conditions are also explained, leading into the strategies taken by the informants and the consequences, producing an action-oriented model through which to view the identities of these young, White Americans. Some technical literature is used as supplementary validation, but the theory is ultimately built up from the data. Though the theory is grounded in very specific research, my hopes are that it will serve as a springboard to grounded formal theories of American ethnic identities.

Because this research has important general implications and relevance for the direction American society is taking, it can and should be used as a source of knowledge for anyone active in the multicultural movement. It is a critical ethnography, which differs from conventional ethnography by way of style and purpose. Ideally a critical ethnographer uses grounded theory methods to inductively develop substantive theory, which I have done through my research on White identity. Just as important to this type of ethnography is its agenda. While conventional ethnography explains how society is, critical ethnography asks what could be. With studies of race and ethnicity for example, a critical ethnographer would not simply explain oppression; s/he would reflect on its sources and suggest ways of resistance. Sociologist Jim Thomas explains, “The ontology of critical thought includes a conception, albeit vague, that there is something better, and that the goal of knowledge should include working toward it.” (Thomas 1993:3-4, 15, and 70)

Rosaldo supports research with political purposes, as well. He explains that scholars could use their “moral imaginations”, guided by understandings of social justice and equality, “to move from the world as it actually is to a locally persuasive vision of how it ought to be” (Rosaldo 1993:194). Like Rosaldo and Thomas, I believe social science should be used for the betterment of society. Suggestions for improvement can and should be debated, but certainly not ignored. It is the responsibility of scholars to share their knowledge about the states of societies in such a way that it could be used to
build understandings about socio-political dynamics. Such knowledge could be used to promote social change in aiding social movements and affecting popular thought.
Chapter 3
The Academic Environment's Effects on Identity

"The older I got, growing up in my town and then especially after going away to Boston, very culturally diverse - and I was very much enmeshed in that diversity through college. And the older I got, the more alienated I felt from my upbringing. I had changed and grown. My eyes had been opened from attending school in the big city."
Greg, age 23.

"I think, as the population grows, people turn to multiculturalism and have the feeling they have to go back to their roots for stability."
Lucy, age 19.

Because all informants for this study were found on the University of Montana campus, most are relatively young, college students. This affects the representative potential of the findings. All of their identities have been influenced by the American university system. They have been exposed to a diversity of ideas, experiences, and people, incomparable to other Western institutions. Given this, I understand that the experiences and perspectives of my data group could not be said to fairly represent all young, White Americans of mixed or ambiguous ancestry. The world is experienced differently by the college-educated and those that are not. What is true for college students is not necessarily true for everyone in the eighteen to twenty-five year old age range. However, as reported by the US Department of Education in 1995, the numbers of Americans who hold college degrees are approximately 22 percent of the population. That is twice the number of college graduates since 1970 (Farley 1996:335). The trend is for more education, as there has been gradual increases in student enrollment across the board. Women, the poor and working class, and other underprivileged groups have been enrolling in record numbers with growing social support and a plethora of financial aid opportunities. In 1990, the US Bureau of the Census published the following statistics.
The percentages represent members of American-born ethnic groups, enrolled in college or already having had completed four or more years. For men, 23 percent of Native Americans, 24 percent of Blacks, 25 percent of Hispanics, 55 percent of Whites, and 60 percent of Asians were college educated. For women, the numbers are even more impressive. 23 percent of Native Americans, 31 percent of Blacks, 32 percent of Hispanics, 62 percent of Whites, and 64 percent of Asians were college educated (ibid. 1996:237). This being so, it may be fair to say that my choice of college students as informants, isn’t so limiting in as much as it reflects changes in the overall population today and perhaps, in days to come.

It is important to note that as students, their identities are greatly affected by their educational experiences. It constitutes much of their individual identities because for many it is essentially a full-time job. Undoubtedly, one of the ways in which students are affected is by way of their appreciation of social diversity. As you will see in the following narratives, my informants are proud of their knowledge of other cultures and lifestyles, as well as their tolerance and acceptance of others. Particularly interesting, was that they would often go out of their way to exhibit their openness to others.

Twenty-three year old Greg (All informants’ names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.) discussed how college was instrumental in “opening his eyes” to diversity. In describing his dominantly White hometown and his impressions of African-Americans, he starts off saying that as a youth, he had romanticized images of urban, African-Americans. They were considered “cool” by he and his friends and were clearly seen as “tough”, unlike themselves. Greg later says that this belief was due to situations he had witnessed in the popular media. By doing this, he is defending himself from the possibility of being judged as biased. He continues this throughout my conversation with him, with other topics.

Greg: "...and my friends listened to some pretty hardcore rap, like NWA and old Public Enemy. I listened to it, as well...It was definitely cool,
but it was also what separated us from them, as far as saying, ...here you have a bunch of fifteen or sixteen year old White kids in a rural, cause you can’t even call it suburban, it’s rural country town, watching these movies about gang members in LA or New York or something. And it was the furthest from what we were or had ever seen. So, to us, and honest to God, to me, probably until I was in my late teens, most of my knowledge and exposure to anybody Black was from the television and movies. And I’m sure we both know they provide very poor portrayals of anybody, anything. It’s ludicrous for us to look at media portrayals and think that’s how Black people really are. But at that time, we didn’t really know that. And it’s not that I really believed it. I didn’t really think about it. I was not exposed to racism or anti-racism very much, and never gave it much thought until I went to college.

Bev: So, what happened when you went to college?

Greg: Well, the first semester was a hard adjustment. I came from a little town, where I knew everybody. Everybody knew everybody.... I walked around with saucer eyes, for the first three months. I got such an education, at that time. I got to school, and my resident director, first day of school, was openly homosexual. And I would say that there was more trash talk or say, bigotry against homosexuals, when I was in high school than Blacks or any other group. You would probably be more upset if someone called you a fag, than if they called you Black or something because you know it didn’t have any basis. And it figures that the first group I’m really exposed to right away was this very hardcore gay group. And that was fine, because the guy was the nicest guy in the world. I got into a little trouble my freshman year and he always helped me out. And then my resident assistant, who lived right next door to me, was a Black woman. Her name was Robin, and she and I get along great. I haven’t talked to her in awhile, but when I was back on the East Coast, I still talked to her quite a bit. So, that first year at school just blew my mind, ya know, compared to what I grew up with....

Bev: So, did college affect your sense of whiteness in any way? Did you see yourself as being White that differed from the way you had previously identified yourself?

Greg: ...um, less White and more, ...I began to identify more with the group I was hanging out with. Deadheads, long hairs, potheads, hippies - ya know, the kind that walks around with Birkenstocks...And like the guys from the basketball team would look at me and go, “Who do you think you are, Jesus?” They’d pick on me and shit. And ya know, I’m six-foot-four. I don’t get picked on a lot. But ya know, I’d go to a pizza place, and there’d be six or eight guys, Black, White, Hispanic, whatever, no particular race or anything. I don’t think it had anything to do with race. It was more like, “you hippie, long hair”, rather than “you White kid”. You know what I mean? ...And I was in such an eclectic group that I never stopped to consider that I’m White and he’s Chinese. It just wasn’t an issue. It was more about we were the kids who smoke pot or whatever.... I got all A’s
pretty much in college, dean’s list. I was business, with an English minor. I was on the editorial staff of the literary arts magazine of Northeastern. So, I was artsy-fartsy, Mister Poet, walking around with a notebook in my pocket, all the time. And then I was going on tours (with the Grateful Dead), collecting music. So, that was my world. And after a couple of years, I got very accustomed to being who I was, in that role. I felt very alienated again, but not because I was White, but because I was...not a jock, which is what I used to be. All through elementary, junior high, and high school, I was totally involved in sports - hockey, basketball, soccer. As I got older and got into the lifestyle change, my values changed. I got alot more liberal-minded.

From these last statements, Greg reveals how through his attendance at Boston University, he found a niche. Through the diversity that exists there, he was able to find a new lifestyle, in the array of choices displayed. The element of choice is a recurring theme in many of my interviews because, for the most part, my informants understand that they exist for them. A college education reveals that there are limitless ways in which people can live their lives. This can promote lifestyles amongst students that differ from their parents’.

Another point to consider is how Greg’s defensiveness continues, as we see when he describes the people he met during his first semester. He makes a point of telling me that his gay resident director was, “the nicest guy in the world”, and that he “get(s) along great” with his Black, female, resident assistant. Does he say this because he had never before believed such relationships were possible? Or, is he drawing attention to the fact that these particular people are the exceptions in their ethnic groups? These are definitely two conclusions one could come to, when examining such statements. However, I found statements like these in abundance throughout my interviews with no apparent evidence of prejudice accompanying them. More likely, I concede that the reason for these types of statements has to do with a need to show me openness and acceptance. My informants want me to know that they are not discriminatory. Race is a touchy subject for young Whites in America. They tend to be very guarded, as though uttering words like “White” and “Black” is proof of racism.
Another interesting observation can be made of Greg's answer by thinking about his description of himself as a hippie. He points out that rather than thinking of himself in racial terms, he identified himself as being part of a group that shared his interests and sense of style, associated with hippies. His experience with this group is indicative of several things, including the sense of community he found within it. This is a point I will explore more in subsequent sections, but for now, I wish to focus on something else. Greg refers to the group as eclectic and states that his clique was comprised of people from different ethnic and racial groups. He didn't give much thought to 'race' because his group found unity in their particular interests. Music and style marked him and other members of his group. As a visible hippie, like other minority interest groups, he encountered some amount of discrimination. While I am not comparing it to discrimination as faced by African-Americans or homosexuals on the grander scale, it is a degree of discrimination nonetheless, that he saw need to tell me about. In a way, I believe he was trying to explain to me, as with his pointing out that race is not an issue for him and his group that because he knows what discrimination is, he cannot be biased himself. Again and again, my interviewees say this very thing. Something has happened in this country to make young people aware that racism and bigotry are not socially supported.

Twenty-one year old Sonja, a junior majoring in social work, had this to say.

"Missoula is such a liberal community, and the university is so liberal, that if you act out, and I'm regarding mostly race here, if you say anything off-color or if you make a discriminating racial comment, you look like the idiot, the moron, the uneducated one. And I guess, (she laughs) not to put too fine a point on it, it's almost like it's not cool. It's not fashionable to be like that. And it's kind of sickening, but just as people follow trends in fashion and health and whatnot, it's almost like it's become a trend - not to be prejudiced. And just like I said before, in high school, dating a Black guy is cool. Ya know, you stick out like a sore thumb, if you are discriminating."

American colleges have been molded by multiculturalism. It is a political
movement guided by an ideology that encourages immigrants and other ethnic minorities to retain their own cultures by not assimilating into the ethnic majority. Likewise, it encourages all Americans to view the values and practices of other cultures with respect and appreciation. In his book *The End of Racism*, Dinesh D’Souza writes that multiculturalism is founded upon the principle of cultural relativism, the equality of cultures regardless of differences. Any differences must be respected and appreciated, without judgment. Multiculturalism and its accompanying ideas have penetrated all American institutions, including our schools. Multicultural education in our universities has caused a questioning of the conventional curriculums, which have been criticized as being biased in favor of Western Civilization’s accomplishments. This Eurocentric curriculum is said to teach a superiority of White, European culture. Multicultural advocates have been revamping the Eurocentric curriculums, not removing Western achievements, but rather, adding accomplishments of non-Western cultures. Moreover, multiculturalists question Western culture, exploring the history and current events in a much more critical way than before (D’Souza 1995:18-21).

Upon discussing multiculturalism with Dylan, an education major, he puts his understanding of it simply.

Dylan: I’m pretty familiar with the topic of multiculturalism in education, just because I’ve been working for the education department. I’ve learned a lot about it, and they have a lot of multicultural classes. I guess as far as where I fit into that, I don’t really know. I mean I’m ...I think it’s important to promote tolerance, racial tolerance, religious tolerance, just tolerance of all different people’s beliefs, actions, that kind of thing. That’s pretty important to do. So as far as where I fit in - a small voice working for a change in a small way.

Another informant, twenty-two year old Erin, puts her understanding of it this way.

Erin: Well, it seems like the role of White people has been to sort of facilitate other people’s education of other cultures.

Bev: Why? Is it because they have the power to do it?

Erin: Well, yeah, and because we’ve been educating people about European history all this time. So, when I was in Chicago, I went to this
rally that was to get Asian studies into Northwestern University. And someone stood up and talked about, well, it was a White male, and he said, "Ya know, my background has been taught to me my whole life. So, why is it that twenty-five percent of the population here is Asian and they don’t get to learn about their background?" ...So, I think that’s true. It sort of seems like White people are facilitating this. I think there’s a certain sense of debt that everyone has to each other to like, sort of make sure everyone’s identity, everyone’s culture is brought out and shown to everyone.

Multiculturalism affects people consciously and unconsciously. Members of my data group generally notice what is going on socially and see changes occurring. They see progress. With one exception, all of my informants, when asked about multiculturalism felt it was a positive movement for America. The thoughts of Dylan and Erin were echoed throughout my interviews. They all understand that ‘America is diversity’. America is what it is because it is made up of people from all over the world. Plus, it is so large that it allows cultural diversity, even amongst those of us that are fourth and later generation American. The encouragement of us all to appreciate differences could only be helpful. However, even with this understanding, the reactions to multiculturalism that I observed were not always positive.

One question I always asked, in some form or other, was “What is your role (or the role of White people) in the multicultural movement?” Six of my informants responded with a similar sentiment, most clearly put by twenty-two year old Tina.

Tina: I think my main role is just to listen. I don’t think I have much to contribute. I guess I don’t really feel like I have much of a culture. I don’t have a specific group of people that I could say, “these are who I identify with and these are who we are and these are our traditions.” So, I can’t really teach about that in any way, but I feel like I can definitely listen and learn. And I like to learn about other cultures and hear what they think and believe. And if I like some their beliefs and traditions, I can adopt some of them as my own.

On the surface, this may not appear to be a negative reaction. Afterall, the goal that multiculturalists try to achieve is the understanding and the celebrating of differences. In fact, Tina, like other informants, embraces differences, as she reveals in her willingness to “adopt” beliefs and traditions of other cultures. Her thoughts are
positive in that she is comfortable and optimistic in her acceptance. However, we cannot ignore Tina’s first idea. We must ask ourselves why young, White Americans feel that they have only to listen. Is this what we want, a large segment of the society feeling as though they have nothing to share?

Earlier, in my conversation with Tina, she expresses an idea that may contain the cause of why she and others, feels they have nothing to contribute.

Tina: White people definitely haven’t been, THE greatest moral people in the world. They did come and take over the land. They did kill tons of Native Americans. But I also don’t feel like that was me. I feel like, yeah my ancestors did that to your ancestors, but that doesn’t mean you should blame me for what they did. And I feel like we just need to get past it and try to work things out now and live together now.

This is not to say that teaching the truth of history is bad. I fully support the idea that students should not be given the whitewashed versions, as they once have. American students should learn in a critical way, the events of the past. The question I have is, why do they feel blamed? Over and over again, my interviews reverberate the same message. Informants always start off by defending the multicultural objective, but they always end up defending themselves. Somehow and in some way, the academic environment has become something of a firing line for White Americans, whereby they themselves, experience direct criticism, rather than just being encouraged to criticize the actions of past others.

Many scholars and social critics say that all White Americans have a responsibility to learn about how they fit into the race hierarchy. This I wholeheartedly agree with. However, I have serious qualms about another assertion, often made, in conjunction with such a comment. That is, it is said that Whites should feel blame, in order to promote change in the existing oppressive conditions. Many college professors must concede.

After speaking to one female informant, Tobie, about her lack of affinity towards
any European heritage, I asked her of her thoughts on a possible White, American heritage. She responded with a prime example of the emotions many White students go through, as well as the ways in which professors handle multicultural teaching.

Tobie: I take responsibility for what I do, not for what happened over three hundred years ago. I’ve had a couple of professors here, one that I just adored, he teaches Native American studies. On the first day of class, he said, “I want a raise of hands of all the students who feel guilty for what your ancestors did to my people.” A few people raised their hands; and he said, “You have nothing to do with that. And if you’re here to feel sorry for me, I want you to leave right now.”

Bev: That’s great. Unfortunately, I’ve had quite a few professors who did just the opposite.

Tobie: Yup. I had another one, African-American studies, and he was very condemning, ...very, I don’t want to say prejudice, but... (she laughs) I don’t care for him, because he’s part of the reason that keeps everything where it’s at. People don’t change their attitude towards people, especially when they hear about how awful...like that guy down in North Carolina, who was beaten and thrown into a river. I didn’t do that. I wouldn’t do that. And for him to condemn quote-unquote White people for doing that, and you’re part of that White race that does that. He’s just fueling the fire. So yeah, I’ve experienced that too.

Bev: So, it sounds like shame or guilt is not something you’ve ever felt, but you have felt anger. (Tobie: Sure.) From my experiences, in two different colleges, I believe that it’s the tendency of some professors to teach about the issues of race and ethnicity in such a way that encourages guilt. And either it works, and young, White people feel guilty, or they become angered. Do you see this as a problem, or were these the only two incidents you’ve had experience with?

Tobie: No. When they talked about slavery in high school too, and they talked about the immigrants and everything...it’s kinda like they wanted you to feel sorry for what your ancestors did to them. Instead of learning of these people’s backgrounds and experiences and the growth that they accomplished, we’re taught about all the awful things we as quote-unquote Americans have done to these people. I felt that way in the African-American studies class. He only made me more angry.

From what I’ve observed, Tobie is not alone. Many professors are presenting their lectures through what is seen by many students as reverse discrimination. This has negative impacts on students, as was seen with Tobie. However, as I mentioned earlier, they all understand the importance of learning about ethnic and racial others. So, while they may feel blamed, they more often than not, try to sympathize. Sonja, who you were
introduced to earlier, had an experience and reaction similar to the one Tobie had in her African-American studies class. She too, encountered a professor who frequently spoke of Whites in a derogatory way. In contrast, she had a way of rationalizing it somewhat differently.

Sonja: Once, when I took this one class on race and ethnicity, the professor would always speak in a sarcastic way about the White people. And I always had to remind myself that he’s White too. He would be up there saying, “Well, the White men just think that they knew everything. They think they knew what’s best.” I understand he was just trying to get a point across, he did. And actually, it didn’t offend me. And after awhile, I just got used to it, because that’s just in his nature. It was in the way he was trying to get his point across. It was a really effective way, but as I was saying, I was always having to remind myself, well he’s White too...cause he would separate himself so much. And he was just acting as an advocate for what he was trying to say. I’m sure it wasn’t meant to be insulting, but it was just his way of getting the point across.

Bev: What was the point?

Sonja: He was trying to make a point that the so-called White people thought that they were superior to other races and that they knew what was best for everyone else. And sometimes, in order to get a point across, people...let’s face it; discrimination and prejudices are not as stringent as they used to be. He was talking about something most of us have never experienced. He was talking about people who worked for Henry Ford, who had to go through de-ethnicization. And those things don’t really occur anymore. And to get his point across, for something we had never personally experienced, he had to say it that way.

Bev: Why do you think we need to learn about that stuff?

Sonja: Well, it has given me a better understanding of how much progress we’ve made. While it’s not that important in the strictest sense of it, I don’t think it’s that important to learn about something that happened a long time ago. I mean why is history even taught as much as it is? I mean, a lot of people could make an argument for that, but actually, when I left that class, I was more ashamed than anything. Because this is the culture and heritage that I came from that subjected other people to things like that...but I know, it was meant to stir up our consciousness a little bit.

In this narrative, we can see that Sonja definitely felt attacked, but because she found a reason for it, she excused this type of behavior from her professor. Because Whites, as a people, were at fault in many of this country’s atrocities, she as a White person could only feel that she deserved such chastisement. Sonja starts off by saying
that she was not offended, but in the end, could not hide the fact that she felt “ashamed”. It is very hard for young, Whites in this country to understand why they are blamed. I, as the anthropologist, have trouble rationalizing it, but perhaps, it can be understood by something else that Sonja speaks of. In the phrase, “discrimination and prejudice are not as stringent as they used to be”, she reveals that she has not seen much ethnic or racial bias in her own experiences. This idea, I know, could be heatedly argued amongst academics and social critics. However, amongst my interviewees such as Sonja, racism is not thought to be as big a problem as it used to be. My informants overwhelmingly see progress. They see diversity as a good thing, and they see society around them emulating this very notion. It may very well be that their erudite environment disillusions them, but as part of the academic progress this country is making, their beliefs may be indicative of larger progressions in American social thought.

Desire for Ethnicity: Where Does it Come From?

“It’s just an identifying thing. They identify themselves as being descendants of Native Americans, true Americans. They’re real; and they’re proud of that. They have to be. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be Native Americans. They’d just be Americans. So, there’s a proudness there. They’re gung-ho about themselves, because otherwise it would be lost.”
Sean, age 22

Bev: Do you see yourself as part of a group?
Wayne: I never really think of it like that...(he laughs). Maybe I’m part of what’s leftover.
Bev: What’s leftover?
Wayne: A big mix...
Wayne, age 24

Because diversity is politically endorsed, many people perceive ethnicity as desirable. It is becoming more of a social resource than a stigma. Because of this, it is
not uncommon for students to want to display their own "differences". Factors in people's lives, such as geography, religion, race, and American culture(s), are elements through which my informants find senses of community and sometimes, ethnicity. Thus, they can be a part of the diversity that is America. All of them, whether or not they view themselves as part of an ethnic group, stress individuality, which we will see is a prevailing theme. This further enhances their sense of difference, without contradicting the concept of collective ethnicities, an idea we will explore more later on. A question that arises here is, if schools have typically functioned as tools of assimilation, encouraging young people to become 'good citizens', while teaching the three R's, why do my college-educated informants express desires for ethnic affiliation?

Richard Alba says that while the larger social trend is a waning of ethnic affiliation, higher education actually increases the chances for it. Education brings about more knowledge of the social world and more encounters with people of various backgrounds. Hence, it heightens awareness of things like heritage, nationality, and ethnicity. Knowledge of ethnicity, he says, is "cultural capital". Students learn "cultural codes", or ethnic symbols, and use them to communicate and establish relationships in their very diverse social world, no longer strongly bounded by kinship and locality. While he does feel that education's effects on identity aren't as strong as those of increasing mixed ancestry and movement away by generation, education does help to sustain, rejuvenate or even create ethnic affiliation. It can definitely be attributed to the frequent encounters with diverse ethnic groups that go along with higher education. However, Alba feels, there must be other social forces that keep ethnicity alive, when the objective basis for ethnicity is crumbling in our society. This is where he leaves off, saying that these are ideas that needs to be explored further. (Alba 1990:58 & 308) My response to Alba is this - Going back to the topic of multiculturalism, it is the prevailing philosophy of higher education in this country. It is a philosophy that urges us all to celebrate differences. Therefore, it is only natural for our students to try to find what is
unique about themselves, just as we have seen. Some young, White Americans do find
themselves as part of ethnic groups, often unconventional ones, as did Greg with the
hippies. However, I cannot attribute America’s perpetuation of ethnicity entirely to
multiculturalism. I do agree that there are other factors involved. So I must ask, what are
these other social forces?

Twenty-two year old Mark grew up in a large town in Texas populated by both
Whites and Mexicans. He describes the Mexicans’ visible “Hispanic appreciation”, as
well as his reaction to it.

Mark: In our town, I know that the Mexican people had alot of pride
in their country. You’d see more Mexican flags than American flags.
You’d see all kinds of celebrations, Hispanic Pride Month, Hispanic pride
rallies, and that was something I only noticed as I got older, as far as the
whole Spanish speaking out. And I don’t know what they were speaking
out against or for, but it definitely made me uncomfortable.

Bev: It did? Why?

Mark: I think that people should have pride in what they are. I
mean that’s healthy, but I didn’t understand, in the town that I lived in, what
the problem was. I didn’t know what they were complaining about. When
they were having their Hispanic appreciation thing that was cool. And when
they didn’t expect anyone else to be a part of it, that was cool...the whole
police force was Hispanic. The whole majority of it was Hispanic. The
mayor was Hispanic. There wasn’t any problem with that. I think what I
was more upset about was the Europeans in the city, that we didn’t have any
kind of, ...that here are all these people...I guess there was all this confusion.
I saw all these Hispanics going, “Yeh, we’re Hispanic!” Ya know,
“Hooray!” And here we are, these White kids, going well, “We’re just
White kids.” We never seemed to have...and it wasn’t that I thought we
needed to go out and rally and say, “Hey, we’re White!” It just seemed like,
here’s culture in America, and we, as White Americans, don’t have one of
our own in common. I mean the closest thing we have in common is
baseball. I’m still confused about it. It makes me uncomfortable only
because I don’t think I understand it. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t be
a part of something like that and whether or not, it’s healthy to be a part of
something like that. I didn’t know, and I still don’t.

Mark had been affected by multiculturalism long before college. In his
hometown, Mexican-Americans had vocal and visible identities that contrasted with his
own. He speaks of Mexican pride and celebrations, and he speaks of a Mexican
community that has a common culture. He also speaks of a lack of pride and disunity in his own White, community. Now, some might argue that there's no need to shed tears for the all-powerful, White people. Afterall, everyday is 'White Pride Day' in America. However, the point here is to simply understand that these young members of the ethnic majority are suffering an identity crisis. They, perhaps like members of some ethnic minorities, feel trapped in the histories and stereotypes of their ethnic group. However, rather than finding a sense of honor in it, they feel embarrassed, ashamed, and as some informants put it, lost.

**Thoughts on Whiteness**

Ashley W. Doane Jr. has detailed phenomena experienced by many dominant ethnic group members, like Mark, he calls “hidden ethnicity”. He explained that dominant group culture, its customs and practices make up what is considered mainstream culture. It is normalized, making White Americans feel like they are the “same as everybody else,” or at least not as interesting as ethnic minorities. Thus, they feel cultureless as compared to the distinctly perceived ethnic minorities. They lack awareness of their own ethnic identity, often not realizing they have one at all (Doane 1997:378).

Erin, a native Montanan, mentioned earlier, had these thoughts to share about a desire for ethnic identity. Her observations of Native American students at school caused her to think about the sense of self she lacks. Here, we enter the conversation just after she describes the social makeup of her community and schools.

Bev: What are the differences, if any between White people and the Native Americans that you’re familiar with?
Erin: ...um, I don’t really know actually. I’m not sure.
Bev: Well, what do you think it was that kept White students and Native American students separate at school? Why weren’t the Native
Erin: I'm sure there's lots of reasons, but I'd say that one of them is that, um, I think the Native American students had certain traditions. They spoke with a certain dialect, and they had a certain way of perceiving things that comes from...um, the fact that they know they're different because they're from a reservation, and their parents are from there. And they have a sort of knowledge of their background. That's probably part of it. It's not stressed so much for me, ya know, where I came from, but the Native American students that I knew, they knew, knew who they are. They had a strong sense. Maybe it's just...I mean for me, it's just more confusion about where exactly I stand, like if I'm a Montanan or an American or...I'm not really sure. But I had a sense that the Native Americans knew exactly who they were.

Bev: Were you ever jealous of that?

Erin: Yeah. Yeah, I think I wanted to have a little more stability, like maybe some sort of tradition that was beyond um, like commercialized Christmases and things like that.

Erin speaks of the Whites and Native Americans segregating themselves at her school. Her explanation of this is the difference in sense of self felt by the students. She sees need to point out the contrast between the confused and those who have self-definition. She repeated the word "knew" to emphasize just how much more the Native Americans understood their identities, than her and her White classmates. This sense of self is something she desires, as she admits to feelings of jealousy over it. She also reveals that along with the sense of knowing who we are, comes stability. What does she mean by stability? Is it about a sense of family or community connectedness? Well, later on in our conversation, she reveals some things that may explain her desire for ethnicity. In response to the question, how important are history and our roots to who we are, she had this to say.

Erin: (after long pause)...I think I always thought it was important, but I don't really know why. I think it has been because people have told me, and also, because like little things, like mashed potatoes is one of my favorite foods. My mom says, "that's what your grandmother liked and her parents" or whatever. And she thinks it's an English thing, I can't remember. And so, it's sort of a sense of like an answer. It sounds kinda silly, but why do I like mashed potatoes so much? And I think it's because of this heritage I have. It's like an answer to why you feel or the way that you, I don't know. I guess it's sort of like a religion in a way. You sort of
believe that. Maybe.

This last part really struck me as interesting. Religions are belief systems. They give their followers meaning for life. They offer, as Erin said, answers to questions. If ancestral roots can offer the type of stability that religions are capable of, then some Americans may be at a double disadvantage. They largely lack both knowledge of heritage and religious tradition. Perhaps, this is leaving many White Americans floundering, looking for answers that Western science and the ‘anything goes’ modern family is unable to provide.

Most of my informants believe in something, some extra-corporeal being. Interestingly though, most are against organized religion. Aside from this research, I had always felt that this has become a popular sentiment amongst American youth. My research only adds evidence to this belief. Most of my informants say that as children, they went to church weekly, but as they got older that activity decreased to religious holidays only. In many cases, attending church stopped altogether for the families. This reflects the vast culture change in America’s movement toward a more secular way of thinking. Another possibility is reflected in the popularity of non-Western religion. A quarter of my informants told me that they are somewhat, if not greatly, influenced by Buddhist or Native American spiritual philosophies. Perhaps this is indicative of disenchantment with things considered American by American youth. Erin brings up another important topic, as to why young, White Americans may express desires for ethnicity. They have a great dislike for what they understand whiteness to be, and more specifically, White, Americanness.

Erin: I sort of have this fear that if I become too much like that stereotype of what White is, having money and those sorts of things, that in a sense, I’ll maybe claim this identity. And I’ll lose things about myself that are true and are a part of me. I think it may be a way of losing myself.

Bev: Do you think these things you dislike about whiteness and Americanness, have anything to do with why you seek your identity? (In an earlier conversation, she expresses dislike for American policies and actions.)
Erin: Yeah, I think so.

Dislike of whiteness and Americaness are recurring themes throughout my interviews. As I have shown, in the section on the educational environment, my informants' repugnance for a racial identity is largely due to the newly redefined understanding of the concept of whiteness. The transforming dynamics between Whites and non-whites has produced new definitions for racial and ethnic categories. The ethnic majority who have long dominated and categorized ethnic minorities, are now experiencing what it means to be challenged and categorized. The racial hierarchy is being dismantled. But what can be said of any aversion to an American identity?

On Being American

Erin was not alone in her distaste for a national identity. Six others in my data group also were overwhelmingly negative about America and went so far as to say outright that they don't like to call themselves American. Eight informants seemed fairly balanced in their appraisals and criticisms of American history and contemporary society, leaving only four with mostly positive comments. (If you do the count, you'll see I've only mentioned nineteen interviewees. The one unaccounted for did not broach the topic with me.)

Mark, the young man from the Mexican-American neighborhood, had this to say about America.

Bev: Going back to your understanding of what it means to be an American, would you say that it's something you can be proud of or something to be ashamed of?

Mark: Both. Generally, I just don't like to think about it a whole lot. ...I want to someday. I want to seriously consider the country I live in. It's just that it's so hard to know what something is about, when you're gonna put all your faith into it. It's so hard for me to know what this country is all about, and what these people who are running the country are
really doing and their reasons for it, and what say we really have in the whole situation. I just don’t know. I really just don’t know. I like America. I like living here. I do feel that we are the free-est country in the world. I mean we are free to do some outrageous things, as far as other countries are concerned. I like it, but see, I just don’t know. It’s even hard to vote cause you just don’t know what these people are about. There’s so much scandal, and conspiracy theories. I just don’t know what this country is about. It doesn’t seem to be about anything in particular. It seems to be about a whole bunch of things, and a whole bunch of confusion, and a whole bunch of opinion and contradicting opinion. So, it’s really hard to throw yourself into this country and say I’m gonna stand up for this, when it’s so scattered anyway.

This distrust in the government is something three other informants expressed, as well. Several others had extensive criticism. Where does it stem from? My first thought is that it may have to do with the fact that it has become increasingly popular to criticize the government and public officials. However, that’s a long American tradition, dating back to the Revolutionary War, when newspapers commonly printed articles and cartoons bashing imperialist England. No, the criticism young Americans have has much more to it than that, but I can only speculate.

As World War II brought about widespread nationalistic pride, post-war years brought about renewed challenges against the government. Farley cited three major changes that he feels caused a great shift in social values. We had Civil Rights, feminism, and the sexual revolution, all of which challenged the status quo and tradition. Civil Rights and feminism, in particular, questioned authority and demanded equal rights and opportunities. The sexual revolution, while difficult to measure its true impact, has dramatically altered the state of family values. The results are seen in the higher rates of premarital sex and divorce. Farley pointed out that divorce is so common that the majority of children now grow up in single-parent households (Farley 1996:4-6). While these three events challenged authority and called for the dismantling of the old rules, they too, brought about a sense of instability and distrust in authoritative abilities. However, these social changes did not occur alone.

Great economic changes accompanied our social revolutions. The economic
upsweep produced by the Second World War, moved the majority of White Americans into the middle class. However, all that began to change in 1973. When oil-producing nations unexpectedly restricted the export of oil to the West, gas prices increased from about thirty-five cents per gallon to over one dollar. The petroleum increases caused rises in the cost of commuting for all Americans, and manufactured products' prices went up due to the necessity of shipping goods to and from factories (ibid: 64). This one event can be said to have had a trigger effect. Economic trends post-1973 have generally been negative.

Even though there have been rises in income, there has been a widening gap between the upper and lower classes. Several recessions have occurred. The one from 1981 to 1982 produced the largest out-of-work population since the Great Depression. Throughout the 1980s, unemployment persisted. Interest rates have been on the rise, so there has been less home and factory building. Foreign producers entered American markets, increasing capitalist competition. Production of American goods was brought to low wage areas or even overseas.

The capitalist practice of keeping wages as low as possible occurred vehemently throughout the 1970s and 80s as unions lost a lot of strength and government regulations worked more for employers than workers. Wages stagnated and then declined. While some of the middle class prospered, many have lost that status, and it seems there is a growing underclass. The census records of 1980 show great income inequality. As reported by Farley, "the poorest 20 percent of households received only 4.2 percent of the total cash income received by all households," making the average income for a family in this group $7,540 annually. "The wealthiest 20 percent of households received 44.1 percent of all household income," making their average income to be $80,000 per year. In 1989 the gap widened further with the poorest 20 percent of families got only 30.8 percent and those on top got 46.6 percent of all household income (ibid: 87). From the portrait just painted, one can see that the middle class is financially and so,
psychologically insecure. The long post-Depression boom allowed most Whites to live in relative luxury, playing into their notions of White superiority. Now that they are losing economic clout their sense of whiteness is challenged in this way.

Dylan, the education major, had a lot to say upon being asked whether or not he considers himself to be American. At one point in our conversation, he touched on three of the topics, broached by Farley: government, capitalism, and family.

Dylan: I'd say I probably qualify as American, much as I don't want to be. It's definitely not something I'm overly proud to be - American. Ya know, this group of rude foreign people who fumble around, and it's like being a tourist in the world almost. America is seen as doing alot of strong-arming. ...With the situation in Iraq and Kuwait, we definitely strong-armed our way in there. And I think a certain amount of pride and nationalism is important, but I think it easily goes way too far, definitely way too far. What it means to be an American is kinda, kinda difficult to say.

Bev: Well, if you were to describe to someone what an American is, what could you say?

Dylan: Politicians are definitely a start...capa, I mean greedy capitalism seems to figure into the American ideals, to some extent. Money is all over the world, but it really seems money is a large portion of the American fixation - well, not a large portion. It's hard to say. But some of it. Unfortunately, the society is geared that way. It's geared towards money and consumer goods. Consumer goods are important to a degree, but I think it's carried way too far.

Bev: What about the American dream? Is that a reality?

Dylan: I hope not. It's not reality for me. Ya know, as one of my friends says, it's a white house, white picket fence, two point X children. That's not her idea of a good time. It's not my idea of a good time. The American dream is settling down, so you can work a job that you hate, so you can work for the weekend. Ya know, we see more work related stress than anything. Stress seems to be a major factor in daily life here.

Here we see that he doesn't want to call himself an American. It's not an identifying factor that he agrees with because as we see in his explanation, he is not proud of what he sees America to be. To Dylan, America “strong-arms”, implying that the government intrudes where it doesn’t necessarily belong. He then goes on to describe the capitalist system. Although meager, his description reveals that he looks upon capitalism as the cause of materialist values and the subsequent factor, stress in the drive
for material achievement, which the ideal American family is grounded upon. Twenty-one year old Josh, a native Montanan, described more specifically how he feels the fixation of money affects people.

Josh: What does it mean for me to be an American? It means, uh, we all go to McDonald’s and get value meals. We all go off to expensive movies, and we spend money like crazy. We live kind of piggish lives. We don’t really have good understandings of what’s going on. We’re all sort of in our separate little worlds. Most people are rude and obnoxious. We’re piggy, basically rich people as compared to the rest of the world. And all we think about is our convenience, and like, ourselves. We’re not really looking at our whole country and helping everybody. Basically, we’re just helping ourselves.

Bev: Why do you think Americans are like that?
Josh: I think it’s just because our country escalated to this. It never used to be like this. We’ve lost our idea of what our country started out to be. And it’s just turned into a technology frenzy.

Bev: What did it start out to be?
Josh: It was all based on faith and hope and love and equality and loving your brother and all that. Now it’s based on how much money you can get and what you can buy and what kind of car you drive, and your computer and the Internet, and the house you have. It seems that it’s not what it all started out to be. And there’s so much shit going on, that I really can’t be proud of America, but it’s not like I’m ashamed either. What could I do about it? I’m just kind of in the middle.

Here, we can see Josh has become disenchanted with America. Ideally the country is based on freedom and equality. In reality, Americans are selfish and consumed by consumerism. Have we become so money-hungry and bargain oriented because we fear economic instability? Maybe. Regardless, seeing America in this negative way, makes some, like Dylan and Josh, want to disassociate themselves from, or at least refrain from identifying themselves nationally. Three people actually went so far as to say they wished for lives outside of America’s mainstream, two desiring simple commune lifestyles and one expressing intent to leave the United States altogether. As with the concept of whiteness, young members of the dominant group often have poor views of what they understand America to be. Because people tend not identify themselves according to things they’re not a part of, and since people tend not to
associate with ideas and activities that they don't morally or ethically agree with, having negative understandings of the America concept, ultimately results in people not incorporating it into their conscious identities.

Frankenberg and Doane have spent a lot of time exploring how White Americans see their lives as cultureless. My interviews overwhelmingly support this assertion. Rather than give you more examples of this, what I would like to do is to take what I have been exhibiting about the views of American society and the idea of a cultureless, White America, and offer this next example as showing a possible relationship between the two. It comes from a young woman, by the name of Lucy. She spent several of her teenage years, living on an Indian reservation in Oregon. Her views of American society clearly stem from the disparities she observed.

Lucy: I look at other cultures and see so many better things and more tradition. I think American culture is so technological that there's no real heritage anymore. I feel like it's all just technological. And I think natural traditions are more relaxing because they're natural, and they keep going, rather than these computers that came out five years ago. They're not with us now. There's new ones. It just doesn't last. Things just get bigger and bigger and who knows what's gonna happen tomorrow.

Here, Lucy suggests that technology, the substance of American culture, causes our lives to change so quickly and consistently, that there's no stability in it. The definition of tradition is "established or customary pattern of thought or action" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997). If one sees the essence of American culture as 'technology', which is ever progressing, then he or she understands this society as constantly changing. This is not to say that traditions do not evolve. The evolution of a tradition had once been more gradual, than in this time of social and technological achievement. Still, there is the fear of not being able to count on the old and familiar. Perhaps it is a fear in the direction these changes are taking us.

Another point Lucy makes is the American drive for 'bigger and bigger', essentially - "out with the old and in with the new". She shows obvious distress that we
simply discard things that were once valuable, to be quickly replaced. Tobie, mentioned earlier in our discussion on education, echoed this sentiment. She too, feels American cultural stability is lacking, as we easily remove and replace.

Tobie: Americans are on a time scale, and things are so important. We have to do things right now and right then. We hire people to take care of our sick and elderly. I used to work in a nursing home. I'd see all the forgotten grandmas and grandpas that are left up there. Old age, illnesses, defects, they're reason enough for Americans to reject other people. Take children, the same thing. If there's a defect, people abort or give them up for adoption. It just kills me. And I was just talking to this guy, who was telling me that a friend of his is giving up a dog because her hips are bad. He can't breed her. It's horrible. It's a beautiful animal - doesn't want it because he can't breed her. He's just tossing her off and giving her away. And that's American culture to me. If it doesn't work right, get rid of it and get something else.

Perhaps the twentieth century phenomenon of new inventions quickly replacing the old, is affecting the American value system. Regardless, the lack of constancy and familiarity is taking its toll on some young people. It's making them long for participation in tradition. When they don't see it in their own culture, it upsets them. For some, looking elsewhere is the solution, whether it is in the past or in other cultures.

While not all of my informants exhibited a longing for stability, most felt anti-American and/or cultureless, for one reason or another. This, I believe, is the cause of desires for ethnicity. Maura, a non-traditional student at age 37, admits no discomfort with her racial or ethnic identity, but did have an interesting point. Whether or not people are troubled by a lack of tradition or a fear of change, discontent of some kind, is behind all of our identity searching.

Bev: Why do you suppose learning about their heritage is so important to some people?

Maura: Everybody has different goals in life, ya know? And they want to identify with something, whereas I guess, I'm more happy just living for the moment.

Bev: So, do you think such people aren't happy?

Maura: They're searching, and what they're searching for, they're the only ones that can answer that. And when they find it, if they're happy,
they'll quit searching, and if they're not, they'll keep searching for something else.

Although Maura is no authority on the subject, she certainly brings up a valid point. If people aren't content with their present situations, they of course will want to make changes. Maura isn’t the only one who felt this way. By my asking, why do so many people seek out their roots, numerous informants felt that it’s due to discontent. Nineteen year old Melanie, from a small town in Oregon, had this to say.

Melanie: I mean if you’re looking for a sense of identity, then I think definitely looking back into the historical, the roots of where you came from, like the African-Americans are doing. I think that’s great. I mean, I think that’s really good. If it makes them have better self-images of themselves and ya know, a better outlook on the world and life, I think that’s really great.

Bev: You mentioned self-image. Do you think that’s some of the motivation behind people seeking their roots?

Melanie: I think so, at least part of people wanting to find out about who they are. But probably because society is so impersonal too. There’s so many of us, and people just need a place maybe where they fit in, or where they feel like they have an identity.

For some, seeking knowledge of their roots may remedy some of what ails them. If their problem is a matter of identity, they can tap into this unutilized identity resource and perhaps, find comfort in it, if they like what they find, that is. As we saw with Mark, he is unhappy about the state of White, American identity, which he sees as apathetic and culturally barren. As he considers the Mexican-American ethnicity, he wonders why he couldn’t be a part of “something like that.” Likewise, others in my data group feel troubled to some degree or other about their identities. They express desires for ethnic affiliation, and some actively pursue it. Unfortunately, for most of my informants, the lack of knowledge they have in their mixed ancestries makes it difficult to pursue a heritage-based ethnicity outside the dominant White ethnicity. Many remain confused. Some, as you will see, find other identity forms in which to appease themselves.
Responses to the American Identity Crisis

Every socialized human being has an identity. We all define ourselves, just as we are all defined by our environments. Many different factors come into play in the shaping of identity. There are things outside our control, such as genetics and socially imposed understandings of race. There are things we may be consciously unaware of, such as childhood experiences. There are also many things we are aware of and have control over; at least we think we do.

People will distance themselves from unappealing identity forms if they can get away with it. While some identity forms can’t be shied away from, such as physical disabilities or obvious racial characteristics, other, less obvious identity traits can be downplayed, hidden, or replaced. Perhaps, our attentions can even be drawn away from something as obvious as white skin, if another identity trait is emphasized. It certainly seems that some of my informants attempt this very thing, as they are all unmistakably White and American. As has been discussed, whiteness and the American cultural identity are wrought with contention brought about by the recent challenges directed at the concepts. While I have found some of my informants to have pride in the accomplishments of their European ancestors and the subsequent formation of America and its progress, most find such serious discomfort with the accompanying events of oppression, that they are unable to reconcile with these aspects of their identities. Thus, they seek out what aspects of themselves they can approve of and feel good about. So, while young, White Americans can’t really escape the fact that they are racially White or nationally American, they can emphasize other identity factors to highlight identity traits that they’re proud of.

Do you recall the comments made by Erin? Earlier we saw that to her, the fear of being “too much like that stereotype of what White is” is enough to make her seek her
identity and find what she feels is her true self. Likewise, Dylan struggles with the same endeavor. He revealed in our discussion of his Southern heritage that he doesn’t wish to associate with that aspect of his ancestry. He describes Southern culture from which his mother’s family has long hailed, as largely racist and intolerant. When I asked him if it made up any part of who he is, he admitted, “It does, but I think we can go past that. I think its important to go past the things we don’t feel are good or right.” He went on to explain that he continues to look for those parts of himself that are positive. I received similar explanations from numerous other informants, as they describe themselves as individuals, apart from the oppressive elements of whiteness and American society.

When discussing just who each one of them is, without exception all of my informants speak of themselves as individuals. They make it very clear to me that they are their own persons, and that they can only be defined through personal experience. Thus, they all reflect the highly esteemed American value of individuality. Yet none of them are free of group affiliation or the desire for it. It is the contradiction in all of their lives. Tobie gave a prime example when she responded to the question, “Do you see yourself as part of any social groups?”

Tobie: I try not to see myself that way, because as I said, that’s brown bagging. And even though I may be in the same group as my neighbor who is also a single mother, also White, also poor, our way of surviving, our way of tackling problems that arise because we are single parents, because we are female, because we are White, we deal differently. So, if I brown-bag myself and put myself in a group, I feel I lose part of what I am, which is a human being who can think for herself. I pretty much just survive.

From this, we can see that she’s adamant about being distinct, apart from group affiliation, as well as the individuality of others. At the same time she mentions, as she does frequently throughout the interview, that she is a poor, single mother, like many she knows. It is clearly a part of how she defines herself, even though she does not consciously recognize it as a form of group identity. Others in my survey do the very
same thing. This is not to say that a visible ethnic group member would deny individuality, as I’m certain the majority of Americans would not. What I’m saying is that some participants in my research group deny ethnic group membership of any kind, even the ethnic majority. I think this is largely due to the value placed on individuality in America. It is an indulgence that Whites seem far more capable of participating in than other Americans because, as members of the ethnic majority they do not feel externally ethnicized. They are freer to express individuality and so, experiment with their identities because out-group categorization is often not so strong or impacting for them. The American majority, being White, tends not to see other Whites as being part of an ethnic group, as ethnic minorities would, simply because the element of opposition does not strongly exist. (Exceptions are: poor Whites see wealthy Whites as ‘Other’ and Whites who live in communities dominated by non-whites.)

Doane has offered a reason why some Americans are unable and unwilling to identify themselves ethnically. He attributes it to the nature of dominant group status. He says that “unlike members of subordinate groups – especially visibly distinct (i.e., “racially” distinct) groups – dominant group members are less likely to be reminded of social and cultural differences on a day-to-day basis, less likely to have their identity anchored in overtly ethnic institutions and social structures, and less likely to have experienced prejudice, discrimination, or disadvantage due to ethnicity or race,” (Doane 1997:377). Also, as was mentioned earlier in the explanation of ‘hidden ethnicity’, the identity of the ethnic majority has become synonymous with the national identity. Therefore, while Americans can easily identify nationally, or individually as we’ve seen, they can deny an ethnic label (ibid: 379).

Why do some people refuse to see themselves as part of a group? Brenda had an interesting thought when she said, “We are coming more together all the time, so powerfully so, in leaps and bounds. And at the same time, I feel there are a lot of small pockets of very strong resistance to that. They’re scared of that. They’re scared of losing
themselves, with their identities, and they resist so hard to change. So the extremes are getting more extreme. As a whole, we’re all becoming more conscious to the fact that we’re all connected”. Everyone wants to know there are others ‘in the same boat’. It is that sense of commonality and connectedness we all crave, to some degree or other. While some are just naturally a part of a group they can feel proud of, others have to search out theirs.

Because Whites have the freedom of ‘individuality’, they are capable of experimenting with their identities in a unique way. Eleven of my informants experiment to varying degrees. I have found six to admit outright that they have participated in extraneous ethnic identities for the purposes of taking on group persona and connecting to communities. One of these culprits, Keith, a thirty-four year old graduate student, had this to say.

Keith: America is very flexible. It’s a culture of convenience. It’s a really adaptive culture. Whatever you need to be at the time, be it. That’s what the culture is. It’s very adaptable. You can’t put a finger on it or anything. It’s whatever it needs to be at the time. At least that’s how I see it. And again, here I am, a White male in the United States, and most people don’t give me an ethnic group. Most people don’t give me a culture, ...well, “You’re American.” I mean being American is hard to point down. There’s a lot of space in America. There’s a lot of different cultures in the United States.

Being half French-Canadian, a fourth English, an eighth Scottish, and an eighth Blackfoot Indian, Keith had his pick of ethnic guises. But he explained just how he went about choosing one nationality over others.

Keith: Well, ya hafta pick something. It’s the movement in the United States to find out who you really are. I think part of it goes with how I was raised. We did spend a lot of time with my father’s family. I mean if anybody looked at me, they’d never say I was Native American. So, I can’t really claim anything from my mother’s side except for maybe English or Scottish, but I don’t have an English or Scottish name. So, it just seemed like the way to go. For anybody knows, I could say I’m Russian-American, but your name doesn’t jive. I think a lot of it is that people today, ...if I go to a grocery store and write a check and they read my name, they go “Oh,
you’re French.”

Keith isn’t alone in choosing just one of his ancestral lines to identify with. Many of my informants do this. However, not all use the same reasoning as Keith. Nineteen year old Lucy, chooses to identify as a generic Native American, even though she is unable to identify the tribal source of her one-fourth heritage claim in any more an assured fashion than to say, “I think there’s some Cherokee in there.” And twenty-five year old Dennis, knowing nothing of his European heritage other than having an Irish last name, has admitted to identifying as Hungarian on occasion because someone told him he had Hungarian features. Of this, he had only to say, “I guess I was just entertaining myself. It was entertaining to hear.”

It is very common for people with several different nationalities to emphasize just one or two. Lieberson and Waters found in census analysis that American Whites are often inconsistent when reporting ethnic origins. They feel that “the decline of ethnic disadvantages within the White population, the high levels of intermarriage, and spatial mobility out of ethnic ghettos would all work toward weakening knowledge of ethnic origins as the generational distance from immigrant ancestors widens through the years. All of this helps generate distortions in the knowledge and beliefs that people have about their ethnic origins,” (Lieberson and Waters 1986:81). We might expect more people to report multiple ethnic origins, particularly among younger people. However, Lieberson and Waters found growth in the number of Whites, ages eighteen to twenty-four, reporting single-ancestry. People are simplifying their ethnic origins. They suggest Americans do this for a variety of reasons. Some people do it to match the ancestry of their spouses. In fact, Lieberson and Waters found the number of married women reporting a single-ancestry household to be notably high. Spouses will either emphasize the common heritage(s) by simply denying unshared heritages or by introducing a pseudoancestry. However, non-married Americans simplify their ancestry as well. Lieberson and Waters find that as people move away from home, they will begin to
define themselves individually, apart from their families (ibid. 1986:81-82). This agrees with my findings that members of the ethnic majority are consciously choosing their ethnic identity. They experiment with their ethnic flexibility and often with cultures completely foreign to their ancestries.

Brenda is one woman who knows what it is to find ethnic belonging in an adopted culture. On her questionnaire, she listed her nationalities as English, German, Swiss, and Norwegian, but noted ignorance about proportions and other possible nationalities in her heritage. I met her through a friend I’ll refer to as Vicki. As I was standing by a conversation they were having, I overheard Brenda say that she felt Vicki was lucky to have a South American heritage and that she wished she had something similar. When I interviewed her, I couldn’t help but to ask her why she felt this way. She responded.

Brenda: Because having culture is like having a good family. It’s ideal, because it sets a foundation for someone to grow upon. It’s a foundation. If anything, it can be hampering too, on individuality. But I’ll tell ya where the wistfulness comes from, me being on an Indian reservation. (She lived on a reservation for four months as a teenager, during a brief stay with her father.) I mean that was as close as I’ve ever come to having culture. I mean, I pow-wowed. I was in an Indian drumming group. I was the only White person. They called me the White Indian girl. And that’s where the wistfulness comes from. It’s that longing to participate in a group celebration of who we are, even if we’re identifying with these temporary identities. It’s still a whole lot of fun to celebrate who we are, like the dancing and the singing and the drumming and the jerking around and feeling part of a group. I miss that, ya know? The bond.

From this we can see two important things. Brenda desires ethnic identity and the sense of community that she feels goes along with it, as says her experience. Plus, she mentions ‘temporary identities’. She can participate in the Native American activities and take on a new role. These temporary identities she talks about can be those “spurious ancestr(ies)” that Lieberson and Waters discovered were being incorporated into the identities of some White Americans. They can also indicate a renewed sense of affinity for one’s heritage, learned or relearned. Sydney, a Philidelphian, also understands the
ethnic flexibility that Americans are capable of. She grew up in an ethnically diverse, working class, urban community, where nationality was highly emphasized. She describes her father’s closeness to some of his Puerto Rican neighbors and the family’s relationships with ethnic Others, in general.

Sydney: We had a lot of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics around, and my dad would associate with them regularly. They were his hermanos, ya know? When we were with those people, I had to act more Hispanic than when I was not with those people. It just happened, like through osmosis or something. Like you’d be with these people and all of a sudden, you’d turn Hispanic. It’s like going with these people, and you’re this person now. Then you’d go with the Russians, and you’re that person. And then you go over here, and you’re that person. So, it was hardly ever a situation where it was only Hispanic or Russian or whoever, cause the diversity was just too much.

Like Keith, Brenda, and Sydney, others in my data group experimented with their identities. Some described times when they drew self-definition from their own ancestral background, even having little knowledge of the ancestral culture(s). Some described times when they drew from ethnic sources that were not their own. Such people had one thing in common. They all hailed from towns and cities where ethnic others resided. Richard D. Alba and Mitchell B. Chamlin had a similar finding in their 1983 study of ethnicity amongst Whites. They found that there are a growing number of people of mixed European ancestry that identify themselves in terms of one group. To them, it is indicative of “ethnic resurgence”, which they attribute to young Americans attending college and living in diverse communities, particularly large cities. The diversity encountered in these two environments produces salience of ethnicity (Alba and Chamlin 1983:245-246).

It seems that ethnic experimentation goes hand-in-hand with diversity. But what about those who live in all White communities, as many Americans do? Do they not experiment with their identities? No informants from homogeneously White communities displayed the kind of ethnic experimentation experienced by those of
multicultural environments. They did however, display diversity in more ways than skin color and nationality. While a variety of factors make up an individual, people tend to have one or two identity issues that stand out for them and set them apart. Primary identity issues may change as often as the circumstances in people's lives.

When asking questions of identity, you will not get simple answers. Many different factors come into play in the making of an identity. However, they are not necessarily of equal importance. In fact, people will often recognize certain issues as more significant. In some cases, a particular identity issue can take precedence. After careful consideration of my interviews, I was able to see patterns in my interviewees' responses. When talking about themselves, informants often reiterated certain ideas about identity. It was common for them to relate topics back to specific identity forms, allowing them to emerge as possible primary identity forms.

Some people found senses of self in their economic statuses, as I've found four informants to do so. Three found identities in state or regional status: a Montanan, a Coloradan, and a 'Northwesterner'. Two found identity in American nationalism, as they compared themselves to American immigrants at the university, as well as cultural Others they encountered through travel. And for five others, primary identity sources were found in the likes of music, *race, religion, sexuality, and technology. (*One informant, Eddie, is a self-ascribed racial separatist who believes he is a member of the White race.)

What surfaces as most significant to one's identity is that which is most in conflict. The aspects of the self, which are challenged or threatened, are brought to the forefront of consciousness. In issues of race and ethnicity, the ethnic majority challenges the ethnic minorities and vice versa. Other identity forms have opposition as well. For instance, music and lifestyle often go hand-in-hand. So, a hippie who listens to and follows the ways of the Grateful Dead may find him or herself in a subculture. For one who is dogmatically religious and yet, attends a college immersed in secularism, may often find him or herself on the defensive. Likewise, a person who moves from one state
or region to another may find him or herself speaking and behaving differently than those in the new environment.

Because identity is created and maintained by on-going interactions between similarity and difference, opposition could be pinpointed for any identity group. As my informants explained their sources of identity, they did so only in contrast to some other group(s) within their communities. It is the nature of the American dynamic that causes people to so fervently seek out "individual" identities, as everyday-life is dabbling in the richness of diversity. This country is ignited by its variety. As my interviews confirm, no description is complete without mentioning it. Diversity can be found in this nation's inception. It permeates all of American history, in all of its facets; and it is particularly prevalent today, as we find ourselves both embracing it and struggling with it.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

"The human individual who possesses a self is always a member of a larger social community, a more extensive social group, than that in which he immediately and directly finds himself, or to which he immediately or directly belongs."
George Herbert Mead 1934

Summary

It is widely assumed that if you are White, of European descent in America, you are unaffected by issues of race and ethnicity. While ethnic minorities are constantly aware of their ethnic and/or racial status, Whites remain unconscious of their racial identity. However, as we have seen, Whites that live in diverse social environments are made aware of their race by the contrastive racial and ethnic identities all around them. More significant to this study is multiculturalism. All of my informants feel its affects as they attend school. No longer does one need to live in a diverse urban environment to feel racialized. They are made to feel their whiteness by academia.

Before they even enter the halls, they are checking the boxes on application forms and learning that their opportunities for acceptance and scholarships differ based on ethnic origin. Then, when they do attend school, multicultural education, as well as the presence of ethnic “Others”, make young White people conscious of their race. Granted, it may not be significant to all, but the college experience can be identity altering. As has been shown, Whites understand whiteness in new ways. As students are asked to think much more critically about the events of the past and the prevailing White hegemony, Whites discover that unlike ethnic minorities, they cannot take pride in their race and cultural heritage with much ease. The more they learn about their White, American heritage, the less they want to claim it as their own.
Upon attending the university, young Americans find themselves in an ideologically liberal atmosphere. Amongst its many objectives, multicultural education promotes the appreciation of social diversity. It promotes tolerance and ultimately, harmony. Students learn that it is not acceptable to be prejudiced. As Sonja put it, "you stick out like a sore thumb, if you are discriminating." So often, White students will make a point of expressing their acceptance of diversity, in the way they consciously choose their friends, in the way they talk (or don’t talk) about race and ethnicity, in the activities they partake in, and as we have seen, in the way they shy away from their heritage.

Multiculturalism, for all its benefits, also has a negative side. As it celebrates the achievements and cultures of ethnic minorities, it creates a normalized image that the ethnic majority is less colorful. In fact, it makes many White Americans feel as though they have no culture at all, and so, they feel unspecial. When Whites are displayed through the lens of multiculturalism, they are most often shown negatively, causing feelings of shame or guilt. Ethnic majority members question their history and themselves. They feel lost, lacking a sense of community because they have found that they cannot be proud of their history as Americans or Whites.

While some members of the ethnic majority are capable of taking pride in their European-American ancestors’ accomplishments, others disassociate themselves from their cultural heritage and their race. When discontented, they seek out new identity forms that they can take pride in. Thus, choosing and experimenting with unimposed identity roles is the treatment for what ails young Whites. R. Cohen contends that individuals in a society, who feel they have little or no power in how their social roles are defined, are prone to feeling alienated, lacking a sense of peoplehood. The antidote to this sense of estrangement he says is ethnicity. He describes it as, “a fundamental and multifaceted link to a category of others that very little else can (provide) …in modern society” (Williams 1989:422).
The Self and Ethnicity

From the research, two things are clear. Americans value individuality. They also desire the sense of community that participation in an ethnic group can provide. This may seem paradoxical, but it is not. The high value placed on individual identity is directly related to the desire for ethnicity. The nature of American culture creates both.

The historical and present cultural climates have made it impossible for Americans to overlook ethnic differences. Decades upon decades of immigration, genocide, slavery, and the "science" of race, have pitted different groups of Americans against each other and made them all race conscious. Currently, we are aware that our society is composed of many different kinds of people with different social experiences and perspectives. Evidence of diversity is all around us in faces, foods, music, and traditions. Multiculturalism encourages us to celebrate differences, ethnic and otherwise, and use that to unify and strengthen ourselves as a nation. The cultural climate socially stimulates us to see ethnic difference almost as much a matter of self-respect as it is a matter of respect for each other. Therefore, just as we are recognizing difference in others, we look to see difference in ourselves.

This research clearly shows that individuality is important, as every informant speaks of it. It is as though they feel that individuality is a right they are all entitled to and should be understood through, this sentiment, resembling the cultural relativism endorsed by multiculturalism. This relates to the appreciation of difference, difference from the American standard that is. Difference is valued, so young Whites, as other Americans, want to know what makes them different. Through the guise of individuality, they find what makes them special. As "individuals", people like my informants, will define themselves with social and cultural characteristics of their choosing. Thus, they associate with people and ideas they can be proud of and disassociate from what they
cannot. For most informants, these individual selves are found and shaped within groups and communities they associate with, whether they are interest groups, subcultures, or ethnic groups. Either which way, the selves exist only in relation to other selves.

In considering the self, George H. Mead explains that individuals genuinely reflect uniqueness in experience and perspective within the dynamics of organized social behavior. However, they are constructed by those same patterns of social behavior that society demands. Without a common structure, there would not be a community. Hence, individuality is created through continuous response to society. "The structure of the self," says Mead, "expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs, just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group." (Mead 1934:163-164, 202)

Because individuality is not independent of community, we must define ourselves with the aid of groups, whether we admit it or not. For most of my informants, openly identifying with the ethnic majority, characterized racially as White and culturally American, is not desirable. Therefore, these young people use their ethnic flexibility to find groups through which they can develop their own brand of individuality. They seek individuality fervently, but they do so in collectivity.

The reasons why people find themselves in different groups varies. Some choose nationalities from their own heritage. People also find community in things like religion, music, or region, like some of my informants; and also like some of my informants, people may adopt foreign cultures to be part of a group. Regardless of how they choose an identity, there is one thing they all have in common. They share an understanding of something I like to call the 'righteousness of oppression', and their primary identity forms are often derived from it.
Righteousness of Oppression

“We had in high school, an entire week, it was called Respect Week. It was devoted to teaching that principle of equality. We were all randomly selected to wear a band on our wrists. If we were to wear a yellow band, we got treated like dirt all week. If we were the blues, we were kinda in the middle. If we were the reds, we were superior and dominant, and we could boss everyone around. So it could be carrying my books for me, or ya know, “pick that up for me”, whatever. I was in the blue group most of the time. I saw a lot of what went on, and it actually increased everyone’s appreciation for minority groups. When you have to live that way for a week, and I know it was a pretty minor experiment, but it really did help to enhance everyone’s understanding. It was a small taste of what it may feel like. And nobody wanted to be reds after awhile because everyone felt really bad. After awhile, everyone wanted to be yellow or blue.”
Sonja, age 21

I chose to begin this section with Sonja’s remembrance of Respect Week because it illustrates a sentiment that I believe many Americans, including my informants, feel. There is pride in struggle. A sense of honor is a key feature in most ethnic groups. Just as ethnic group members may share common ancestries or current social experiences, they may also share a story about their people. P. Davis feels an image or myth is essential to the formation of ethnic groups. “This image can be provided by legend or history, religion, poetry, folklore, or what we more vaguely call ‘tradition’. It need not be expressed in precise or absolute terms; on the contrary it is usually flexible and capable of being gradually transformed, but if a people is to be conscious of its identity it must have such an image” (Williams 1989:429).

Perhaps because ethnic minorities have been so vocal in this past century, Americans know the stories of oppression. Experiences by African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans for example, have taught all Americans the sense of pride that comes from struggling to overcome hardship and the pride that comes from being able to say that they descended from a strong people. Alba described a sense of
social honor European descendents in America can ascribe to. He said that immigrant ancestors are thought to have struggled and made great sacrifices for hopes of building better lives for themselves and future generations. Whether or not this is true for particular individuals and families, this romanticized “American experience” is a history open to all Whites (Alba 1990:315).

This concept of pride in struggle is well understood by members of my sample group, but several people talked about their lack of pride. Apparently, they do not know Alba’s immigrant story. While some people do know “the story”, not all apply it to themselves. Tina, who is reportedly half Irish in ancestry, had this to say.

Tina: Even the Irish, when they first came to the Americas, they weren’t accepted. They were considered not as good as everyone else. They were forced to work crappy jobs. Some of them were basically slaves; they were indentured servants. So they had to fight their way up as well. I think that can be why my mom relates and even I do somewhat. I guess I relate to struggle.

Bev: The immigrant starting out in a new world – would you say that is part of your history?

Tina: Yeah, I think that’s why other cultures have more pride in their culture and in their race, because they had to struggle more. Whites kinda have this image that we didn’t really struggle. We just came and took over. And how can you really be proud of that? You’re way more proud of something if you struggled and worked for it. So as a race in general, Whites haven’t struggled as much.

Here we can see Tina recognizes that her Irish ancestors struggled, and there is a sense of honor she finds in that. She also reveals an understanding that ethnic others find pride in the struggles of their ancestors. As a descendant of the Irish, Tina can be proud, but as a descendant of White Americans, she finds no honor, as shown in her statement, “Whites haven’t struggled as much.” She brings this topic up because she is White in America. She can’t escape this racial category, and American society no longer allows the ethnic majority to deny the fact that “Whites have done horrible things,” as Tina repeatedly says. This guilt she feels is, as we have seen, something many of my informants feel. Given a choice, we all want to be free from guilt, don’t we?
Although race is often not an issue for many dominant group members, particularly those living in dominantly White environments, race is an issue of significance for the university students I spoke to. Whiteness, as it is presented to them in the classroom and by ethnic Others they encounter, is not a source of pride. Perhaps this is why people like my informants seek membership in groups. If, as Weber said, ethnic honor is an essential aspect in holding ethnic groups together, then it is true that all groups have their stories of oppression and struggle (Weber 1922:389). There is a sense of righteousness to be had in that. We all want honor, and we all want to be free from guilt.

Brackette F. Williams understands the phenomena of people disassociating from one group in pursuit of a more desirable one. As he explained, “people aim to separate themselves, either physically or ideologically, from those against whom they are unfavorably judged and/or in relation to whom they are materially disadvantaged. They proclaim themselves a new people, a pure people.” No ethnicities as “pure”, righteous community groups, “can afford not to” emphasize all accomplishments and positive attributes to legitimize their claim to equal citizenship (Williams 1989:429, 435-436). While members of the ethnic majority are not typically disadvantaged economically, many are. For them and particularly along with those who feel the impact of the changing definition of whiteness, a sense of “purity” in identity is an understandable pursuit.

Chances are that Whites will continue to desire and seek group membership to escape the White past. Perhaps it will happen as Lieberson says: Whites transgressing European affiliation and merging into an “American” ethnicity; or it could occur as Alba foresees: Whites embracing a “European American” identity. Doane knows that a label for the ethnic majority will inevitably emerge, but he disagrees with both Lieberson and Alba. He says that an unhyphenated American label will not work because subordinate groups contest it. Of the European American label, Doane says that it is not a concept
considered outside academic circles. Rather, he believes that "whiteness" may possibly transmutate from a racial category into an ethnic one, with a shared sense of history and social experience. The combining of ethnicity and race he says, will allow Whites an escape from the legacy of dominance and privilege (Doane 1997:389).

My data supports Doane over Alba. None of my informants use the term European American nor do they describe concepts that resemble it. Any connections they make to Europe are specific to certain nations, not generalized as Alba might assume. On the other hand, I disagree with Doane's assertion against Lieberson, but only to a certain extent. My informants use and understand the concept of the unhyphenated American. They recognize an American heritage, and for some, it is a source of pride. However, though they apply 'American' to themselves, there is enough evidence to indicate they desire a hyphenate. It is the hyphenate that would give them status outside the ethnic majority and make them feel less 'normal'.

Since neither the unhyphenated American nor the European American concepts can adequately explain the ethnic majority, we must now question Doane's idea. Is there a blurring of whiteness and ethnicity? Whiteness and Americanness are in some ways synonymous to some people, indicating what I have long thought. As other racial categories, whiteness is now perceived socially rather than biologically. So, I see whiteness as a possible categorical term denoting cultural and social experience. I do not see how it could be used to escape the legacy of whiteness by simply becoming recognized as an ethnicity. Ethnicization of race alone will not make people forget the truth of history. The ancestors Whites descended from will not change. There will still be a shameful past to contend with. Whites will continue to try to disassociate themselves from it.

As stated earlier, members of the ethnic majority cannot escape the fact that they are White or Americans. Consequently, even though they do not approve of the identities, they do not deny their race or culture, proving Lieberson to be partially correct.
The American label is in use, and many people do not have a hyphenate, but there is a clear desire to feel special. Members of the ethnic majority desire an ethnic identity they can recognize. In a sense what they desire is an aspect of ethnic minority status; they desire ethnicity outside the dominant group ethnicity. This does not mean they would readily give up majority privileges. Yet at the same time, that is not what they want to be known for, and the idea of the “White American” connotes precisely that.

The truth about my data group, and perhaps all young, White Americans, particularly those who are college educated, is that they are positive about who they are. However, when it comes to speaking of themselves as Whites and Americans, they feel disconcerted about these aspects of their identities. The two concepts overlap, containing qualities of aggression, capitalism, dominance, and imperialism that cause many to relate to them negatively. Outside the racial concept however, young Whites in America are enthusiastic about pursuing and nurturing aspects of their identities that set them apart from the ethnic majority.
Appendix #1

ANCESTRY IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is being conducted as part of an anthropological research study. The ultimate goal of the study is to learn how young Americans of mixed ancestry identify themselves. The short list of questions that follow are a part of the preliminary investigations.

1. SEX: __________________

2. AGE: __________________

3. ARE YOU MOSTLY OR ALL OF EUROPEAN DESCENT? YES NO

4. IF KNOWN, WHAT NATIONS AND CULTURES DID YOU DESCEND FROM? PLEASE ESTIMATE THE PROPORTIONS OF EACH NATIONALITY, BY USING FRACTIONS. IF YOUR ANCESTRY IS UNKNOWN OR UNCLEAR, PLEASE INDICATE THAT.

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5. CONSIDERING YOUR DIFFERENT ANCESTRAL LINES, HOW MANY GENERATIONS HAVE YOUR FAMILIES BEEN IN AMERICA?

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6. HOW MUCH DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH ANY OF YOUR ANCESTRAL NATIONALITIES?

Ex. THE IRISH

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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for filling out this questionnaire. Your input is greatly appreciated. In up-coming days, I will be conducting interviews on the subject of personal identity in which I hope to learn more about the issues asked about above. If you have an interest in being interviewed, please write your first name and telephone number.
EXPLANATION OF PROJECT, "EUROPEAN DESCENDENTS IN AMERICA: AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY."

Ethnic identity is increasingly important to Americans. As multiculturalism has grown in importance, people have been learning to appreciate cultural diversity. Ethnic minorities are unifying and empowering themselves, as they celebrate their own histories with great enthusiasm. For many White Americans in the dominant ethnic group(s), this presents a dilemma. Their roots as European nationalities are commonly muddled by the fusion of mixed ancestral blood, and their histories as Americans are tainted with shameful racist ideologies. This causes feelings of guilt and confusion that leaves many White Americans wondering how to define themselves culturally.

Through my thesis research, I will be exploring the identities of such Americans. I want to learn about how they do define themselves, in regards to notions of race, ethnicity, economics, and any other significant factors. I hope to add to the knowledge of what 'whiteness' is beyond, as well as within, the systems of domination. I think it is important for Whites seeking identity and ethnic affinity. It is also a crucial understanding for those ethnic minorities as they continue to challenge the dominant ethnic culture(s). I believe a thorough analysis of 'whiteness' will prove to be one of the necessary steps towards easing America's ethnic and racial relations.
Appendix #3

POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What does it mean to be an American?

- Is it something to be proud of or ashamed of?

- What is your understanding of multiculturalism? Is it important for American society?

- Where do you see yourself fitting into the multicultural ideal?

- (If they mention specific ethnic groups) What makes the ethnic groups distinct?

- (If they mention ‘whiteness’) What if any, cultural traits are associated with whiteness?

- What groups of people did you interact with during childhood? What types of interactions occurred?

- Did contact with other ethnic groups ever cause you to question your own identity? How?

- Have you ever identified yourself as ‘White’?
Appendix #4

Those I Interviewed

The interviews took place between May 1998 and July 1999. The names used here are pseudonyms. Name, age, and date of interview head each entry. They are in order of date of interview. Each entry contains information gained from both the questionnaires and the interviews. Keep in mind that all informants reported very little or no affinity to their European heritage.

Dylan, age 18, 5/98

Ancestry – He guessed his heritage to contain thirty to forty percent Irish and some unknown portion of Scottish. Any other ancestral lines are unknown. He does not know how long his families have been in America, and he claims no European affinity.

Homebase – Dylan moved several times throughout his childhood, but spent the largest chunk of his childhood in a large Florida town, consisting of Black and Latino populations.

Sydney, age 24, 5/98

Ancestry – She reported unspecified portions of Polish, Argentinean, Russian, French, and Romanian ancestry. While she is only second generation American, from both sides of the family, Sydney claims “very little” European affinity.

Homebase – She was born and raised in Philadelphia. She described her community as racially consisting of Blacks, Latinos, and Whites. Immigrants of various sorts were also present. “Spanish” and “Russian-Israelis” were among her friends.
Melanie, age 19, 7/98

Ancestry – She reported unspecified portions of Scottish, English, Irish, French, and Dutch ancestry. Being four or more generations removed from Europe, she claimed no affinity for Dutch ancestry and very little for her British isle ancestries. However, she did say that she greatly identifies with her French heritage, not because of familial knowledge and tradition, but because of her last name.

Homebase – Melanie was raised in a predominantly White, large town in Oregon. She said that her only significant experience with non-whites was during one semester in Japan.

Maura, age 37, 7/98

Ancestry – The only thing she is certain about is being one fourth Swedish, having had an immigrant maternal grandmother. The rest of her heritage she attributes to Montana, not knowing how many generations her families have been there. Maura claims no European affinity. While not reported on her questionnaire, she revealed belief in having some unspecified amount of “Native American” blood.

Homebase – While born in Georgia on a military base, since the age of six, she has lived in a small Montana town. Her neighbors were all White, but she did attend school with Native American children.

Eddie, age 20, 7/98

Ancestry – He reported that he is half Hungarian (Germanic) and half Spanish (Celtic and Gothic in origin). Both of his parents are immigrants, so he is only first generation American. Normally this would keep someone from my interview process. However, I chose to interview him because he claimed no affinity for his European heritage, but great affinity for his “White heritage”.

Homebase – Born and raised in a suburb of Hollywood, California, he was exposed to
great diversity. Eddie described his community as consisting of one third Whites, a third Latinos, mostly Mexican, and a third Asian, mostly Korean.

Erin, age 22, 7/98
Ancestry – She reported confused proportions of Irish, Swedish, German, English, and Czechoslovakian ancestries. She knew for sure that she is of fourth or later generation American on the Irish and Swedish sides, but could not say anything about the other nationalities. For all but the Irish and Swedish ancestries, she wrote nothing about affinity. For her Irish and Swedish heritages, she claimed on her questionnaire to identify with them moderately. In the interview, it was revealed that this meant the drinking of coffee from “tiny Swedish cups”, the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day, and the living up to Irish-American stereotypes. No other traditions or behaviors could be named.
Homebase – Born and raised in a large Montana town, she is fifth generation Montanan. Her community was mostly White, with small numbers of Native Americans and Blacks, “just enough to notice”. Erin did not recall witnessing any ethnic tension. She has pride in being Montanan, being able to cite a long genealogical history for the state.

Keith, age 34, 8/98
Ancestry – He indicated on his questionnaire that his heritage consists of one half French-Canadian, one-fourth English, one eighth Scottish, and one-eighth Blackfoot Indian. During the interview, he revealed confusion about these numbers. He wrote that he is only second generation American on the French-Canadian side, having ‘moderate’ affinity for it. The connection he felt for it has nothing to do with tradition, but rather the genealogical details he knows and the fact that his last name is undeniably French. Of the other nationalities, he lists himself as being third generation American and having no affinity.
Homebase – He was born and raised in a small, “middle-class” community in New
Hampshire. Keith described it as “definitely a White bred town”. He said that there were no non-white families in his community at all, until he was sixteen, so he saw nothing of discrimination for most of his childhood.

Samantha, age 22, 8/98

Ancestry — She claimed being one-fourth German, one-fourth English, one-fourth Hungarian, one-eighth Russian, and one-eighth Polish. Although she is of second generation for each ancestral line, she identifies “very little” with them. In her interview, she mentioned that the Russian portion of her family is Jewish, and although she was not raised in the Jewish tradition, Samantha feels its necessary to respect and learn about her Jewish heritage.

Homebase — She was born in Ohio, but has lived in various Montana towns since the age of two. During her elementary school years, she lived on Indian reservations, often being teased for being White. In later years, Samantha lived in dominantly White towns, but differences remained an issue for her, as she traveled abroad several times.

Tina, age 22, 8/98

Ancestry — On her questionnaire, she indicated that she is half Irish, one-fourth English, and one-fourth Swedish, being of fourth or later generation American for each. During her interview, she revealed uncertainty about the numbers. For the English and Swedish ancestries, she wrote that she identified with them “very little”, but in the interview expressed that she did not identify with them at all. Of her Irish ancestry, she wrote that she identifies with it “moderately”. Through the discussion I had with her, I learned that this is in reference to her belief in Irish-American stereotypes, the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day, and her mother claiming an “Irish temper”.

Homebase — Tina lived in a very small, Southern California town until the age of ten. It contained as many Mexicans, as it did Whites. When she was ten, her family packed up
and moved to Montana, where she has been ever since. She feels she is Montanan. In her Montana town, she was exposed to Whites primarily. The differences she felt were economic, more so than ethnic or racial.

Sean, age 22, 9/98
Ancestry – On his questionnaire, he claimed one-fourth Dutch, three-eighths Irish, one-eighth German, one-eighth Russian, and one-eighth Welsh ancestry. For all ancestral lines he is four or more generations American, claiming no affinity for any of them, except Ireland. He attributed his “moderate” affinity for Ireland to his Catholic maternal grandparents. While not raised Catholic by his parents, during visits with grandma, he and his siblings attended church.
Homebase – Born and raised in a large, resort town in Colorado, Sean encountered “lots of money, lots of Whites, and few Blacks, not even enough to speak of a Black community.” At the age of eighteen, his family moved to Montana where he began attending college. It was only then that he felt he knew anything of cultural diversity.

Sonja, age 21, 9/98
Ancestry – Sonja indicated being unknown proportions of Irish, Scottish, English, German, and Dutch. She thinks she may be as much as one fourth German. She indicated that she is not sure how many generations her different ancestral lines have been in America nor does she identify with any of them.
Homebase – She was born in a large Idaho town, where she lived until the age of eleven. She described the community as mostly “White trashy”, but it had a significant Mexican population to speak of. At eleven, she moved to a large Montana town, which she described as much more diverse. There she had non-white friends, particularly Asian.
Wayne, age 24, 9/98

Ancestry — He reported unknown proportions of Scottish, Irish, Austrian, and English ancestry. He wrote on his questionnaire that he identifies “very little” with his ancestral nations. Through the interview, I learned that he in fact, did not identify with them at all.

Homebase — He was born in a small, Wyoming town, made up of “hicks and miners”. Wayne’s family moved between Wyoming and Montana several times throughout his youth. All of the towns were predominantly White. It was not until college that he experienced any diversity.

Tobie, age 28, 9/98

Ancestry — On her questionnaire, she claimed to be one half Norwegian and one half Swedish, third generation American on both sides. Tobie said she identified “very little” with her heritage, speaking of Lutheranism and Swedish foods at Christmas time as the only European traditions.

Homebase — Born and raised in Montana, she has lived in several different towns. All but one were predominantly White. For a few years during young, adulthood she lived in a town on an Indian reservation. There she witnessed racial antagonism from both Whites and Native Americans.

Brenda, age 22, 9/98

Ancestry — She estimated that she is a quarter English, a quarter German, a quarter Swiss, and a quarter Norwegian. In her interview, she revealed that those were just guesses and that there’s probably more to her heritage than she knows of. Brenda feels certain that she has to be of fourth or later generation American on all accounts. She feels no affinity towards her European ancestry, but does speak of an American heritage. She was one to speak at length about having a long Montana history.

Homebase — She was born and raised in a small Montana town, described as “very
redneck, very conservative, very White.” As a teenager, her family moved her to a larger Montana town, where she first met non-white people. For a period of a few months, she lived on an Indian reservation. There she experienced good and bad, as she was both made fun of for being White and welcomed into cultural events.

Patrick, age 22, 9/98

Ancestry – He reported that he is one-fourth German, one-fourth Italian, one-fourth Swedish, and one-fourth Mexican. He wrote that he is second generation American on the Swedish, Italian, and Mexican sides, but his interview contradicted this. It seems his families have been here longer, according to the Southwestern genealogical history he described. Of his German ancestry he is unsure. He feels no affinity for any of the nationalities he listed.

Homebase – Patrick moved frequently throughout his childhood, but spent the most significant amount of time in Seattle. It is there that he calls home. Being in a city, he was familiar with diversity, but his high economic level hindered his interaction with it. His neighborhood and school consisted entirely of “upper class, Whites”.

Lucy, age 19, 10/98

Ancestry – On her questionnaire she listed her nationalities as being three fourths Irish, one fourth “Native American”, and some amount of French, indicating her uncertainty about those numbers. While not sure of her French heritage, she also wrote that she is third generation Irish and Native American, indicating further confusion about her ancestry. She knows nothing of being French, but identifies “very little” with her Irish ancestry. She wrote that she moderately identifies with her Indian heritage, which she thinks might be Cheyenne. Any affinity she has for her heritage is attributed largely to books on Ireland and Native America that her mother has read.

Homebase – As a young child, Lucy lived in a small, Southern California town populated
mostly by Mexicans. At the age of nine, she and her family moved to an Indian reservation in Oregon, where her nearest neighbor was “miles away”. She described her home life there, as very poor, but culturally rich. While she witnessed racial tension, she also experienced Indian traditions and a sense of community.

Mark, age 22, 10/98

Ancestry - He approximated that he is one-fourth English, one-fourth French, one-fourth German, and one-fourth Irish. He knows not how many generations his families have been in American, nor does he know enough about them to identify with his ancestral cultures. However, he did say initially that he moderately identified with his German heritage, but the interview revealed that it was “only a name thing.”

Homebase - Born and raised in a Texas city, he was surrounded by Mexicans in his working class neighborhood. He recalled a lot of ethnic stereotyping between Whites and Mexicans, usually “in jest”. He did not recall any hostility. He spoke at length about the various cultural events and symbols of ethnic pride he observed throughout his life.

Greg, age 25, 2/99

Ancestry - He reported unknown proportions of English, French-Canadian, German, Irish, Scandinavian, Dutch, and “Native American” ancestries. He wrote that he is third generation American on the English and French-Canadian side, his father’s ancestry. He knew nothing about his mother’s European heritage. For all, he identified “very little” with them. Greg was able to speak with some detail about a long New England heritage.

Homebase - He was born and raised in a small, rural community in Massachusetts. He described his White, upper middle class upbringing as “very limited”. He encountered no diversity until he attended college in Boston. There he was exposed to great diversity.
Josh, age 21, 3/99

Ancestry – On his questionnaire, he wrote that he is one fourth German, one fourth Swedish, and one half English. He ignored the fifth question about generation, and he circled one “not at all” for the question on affinity. He conceded the possibility of an American heritage with much criticism. In fact, the topic took up half of the interview.

Homebase – Born and raised in a small Montana town, he experienced no diversity. However, he did experience discrimination, as some neighbors and classmates taunted him because of his sexual orientation. For a period of a few months, right after high school graduation, he lived in a California city. There he interacted with people of various races and ethnicities, but for the most part, he has lived predominantly amongst Whites.

Dennis, age 25, 4/99

Ancestry – He knew that he has some Irish ancestry because of family names, but did not know proportion or any sense of affinity. He did not know of any other ancestral cultures, but confessed that he has told people that he is Hungarian because someone once told him he had Hungarian features. Dennis was able to describe some genealogical details of an American heritage. Apparently, he had a paternal great-grandfather who homesteaded in Oklahoma.

Homebase – He was born and raised in a resort town in Colorado. He was sheltered from any diversity that existed because his family only interacted with the “snobs of Colorado”. He described his community as wealthy, Protestant, and White.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


