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**Hope and the Post-Racial:
High School Students of Color and the Obama American Era**

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**Hope and the Post-Racial:
High School Students of Color and the Obama American Era**

by

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Dedication

To my parents, for all the reasons.

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**Hope and the Post-Racial:
High School Students of Color and the Obama American Era**

William Louis Smith, Ph. D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Anthony L. Brown

Drawing on critical race theory, racial formation theory and the extant literature on the so-called post-racial turn in American life, this research explored the broad question of how young people of color make sense of issues of race and equity in the era of the first Black president. Using a case study design, as well as elements of visual research methods and narrative inquiry, I examined how a group of high school students of color at a predominantly White high school have learned about race and Obama, considering both formal school curricula and out-of school sources. I also sought to understand what significance the students placed on president Obama's election, including their views on racial progress in the U.S. and their beliefs in the plausibility of a post-racial American era.

Through the collection and analysis of interview, classroom observation, and artifact data, my findings suggest that schools can be unfriendly spaces for learning about these topics, but students pick up rich, though scattered, information through out-of-school sources such as family, community, and media. Additionally, students exhibited contradictory beliefs about race in America, with experiences of racial marginalization at

school juxtaposed with measured optimism about racial progress in the U.S. Students also expressed personal inspiration in having a Black president and a willingness to hold multiple, competing narratives about race, Barack Obama, and their own lived experiences. These findings suggest a need for history and social studies teachers to provide formal curricular spaces for open discussion about race and President Obama to allow students to discuss and extend their multiple Obama narratives. Researchers must also consider the hybridized racial stories of both students of color and of the 44th president.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Well there are a lot of things I think I can accomplish, but two things I know. The first is, when I raise my hand and take that oath of office, there are millions of kids around this country who don’t believe that it would ever be possible for them to be president of the United States. And for them, the world would change on that day.”¹

- Barack Obama

In the Fall Semester of 2008, I was teaching middle school in a predominantly low-income African American community in Northeast Washington, D.C. Though my students rarely mentioned the goings-on of political Washington just a few miles away – most, in fact, had never seen the U.S. Capitol or the National Mall – they nonetheless had been swept up in the national excitement of the presidential campaign. More specifically, the buzz surrounding Barack Obama’s run for office that year was palpable, even in this marginalized and disenfranchised corner of the American urban landscape (Alexander, 2010). Students in my classes wanted to discuss the election and often peppered me with questions about my political preferences and general impressions of the campaign. But more than anything, the students discussed then-candidate Obama with a mixture of excitement and intrigue. In fact, in the months leading up to the November election, a number of these twelve-year-olds mistakenly assumed Obama had already been elected, and often took the opportunity (whether relevant to our discussion or not) to proclaim, “Well, we’ve got a Black president now!”

Looking back on that time period, I cannot say that I handled these expressions of political (or racial?) pride effectively. Feeling the weight of looming standardized tests in the high-pressure context of an underperforming urban school, I typically listened to students’ Obama-related declarations and questionings with bemusement and then

¹ (Cited in Heilemann & Halperin, 2010, p. 72)

ultimately guided our conversations back to the task at hand. Never, regrettably, did I seek to understand how and why some students had come to prematurely believe Obama had been elected president. Perhaps more importantly, I similarly missed the opportunity to engage my students in a meaningful discussion about the election and about what significance Obama held for them. What symbolic importance did my students attach to the election of the first Black president in American history? What changes in their own lives, if any, did they foresee if Barack Obama became leader of the most powerful nation in the world? How would the election affect the students as democratic citizens?

The research project described here stems in part from my students in D.C. I regret these failures to understand both how they conceptualized Obama and, by association, what these images of Obama suggested for my students' own racial, social, and political identities. I cannot return to that community and ask these questions now, and to attempt such a retracing would only provide a contemporary interpretation of the subject, filtered through over five years of experiences and hindsight. The emotions and perspectives of my students existed as they were only in 2008. Nevertheless, this dissertation project took inspiration from those students in that particular moment and the questions that I failed to ask then.

The noteworthiness of Barack Obama's 2008 election was lost on few, both in the U.S. and abroad. Through his resounding victory over Senator John McCain, Obama became the first ever world leader of African descent, not only in the U.S., but also of any nation in Asia, Europe, and North America (Smith & King, 2012). In his inaugural speech, Obama himself acknowledged the historic significance of his election:

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed - why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall, and why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not

have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath. (“Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2009)

Obama here touches on a theme that has been consistent for him in the years since his election, Martin Luther King’s notion of *beloved community* (Hill, 2011). In the beloved community, the nation draws upon its diversity and its pluralism to overcome adversity, with national unity trumping individual differences. As Obama and others have suggested, his own election stood as another crucial step in this march toward increased rights and prosperity for non-Whites in America, a step many civil rights leaders feared they might not see in their lifetimes (Bell, 2009; Bobo, 2011).

With the historic 2008 election came conversations in popular media about the extent to which a new era in American life had been inaugurated alongside Obama, a time and place broadly referred to as “post-racial America.” The proponents of a post-racial theory of American life saw Obama as the capstone to a project that had been developing in recent years. Bobo (2011) described the post-racial ethos as one in which American society has “genuinely moved beyond race, so much so that we as a nation are now ready to transcend the disabling racial divisions of the past. From this perspective, nothing symbolizes better the moment of transcendence than Obama’s election as president” (p. 14). CNN’s Soledad O’Brien noted that, though race should not be overlooked, “it is not a barrier, and that is where the question of inspiration and promise of America comes in” (cited in Alemán, Salazar, Rorrer & Parker, 2011, p. 479). Or as MSNBC’s Chris Mathews infamously reflected after watching Obama’s State of the Union address:

I was trying to think about who he was tonight. It's interesting: he is post-racial, by all appearances. I forgot he was black tonight for an hour. You know, he's gone a long way to become a leader of this country, and passed so much history,

in just a year or two. I mean, it's something we don't even think about. (MSNBC's Matthews On Obama: "I Forgot He Was Black Tonight" Jan 27, 2010)

Mathews' sentiments are fraught with racial implications that could be parsed and analyzed, but the general message is clear: the nation elected an African American as president, and because of that accomplishment, we (collectively, as a nation) need not think of his background again. The country has put the scar of race behind itself.

Others captivated by the post-racial fervor have pointed to increases in the numbers of African Americans in political and business leadership (Sugrue, 2010), the burgeoning Black middle class (Bobo, 2011) and the rising percentages of people of color in the overall U.S. population (Marable, 2009), along with recent "victories" for those advocating race neutrality in education and voting rights (Christie, 2013), as evidence of a positive shift in racial tides. Obama's election in 2008, then, simply solidified this pre-existing trend towards racial equity, wherein the country has now collectively witnessed the "end of Black politics" (Bai, 2009) or the "end of White America" (Hsu, 2009). The historic nature of Obama's *firstness*, coupled with these improving conditions for racial minorities, produced this logic of a post-racial era. As Williams (2008) notes,

Representing himself without sentiment of anger or bitterness toward American whites because of the transgressions of their primogenitors, an African American who has bought into the idea that America and its proverbial dream can materialize for all of its citizens – including those who were once slaves – enables Americans [sic] whites to connect with a possibility that American racism is a thing of the past. (p. 58)

Those concerned with Obama's significance for race in America, as I am, consider the ways in which pundits, journalists, social scientists, and educators begin to frame the

story of Obama's identity, his narrative, so to speak. At this juncture, it appears that the prevailing Obama narrative is one of leading the charge into a post-racial era.

However, numerous scholars and pundits have vocalized their skepticism over the plausibility of a post-racial turn in American life. A wide range of social and material disparities between Whites and people of color support this skepticism (Haney-López, 2010; Selmi, 2010; Smith & King, 2012). Paul Ortiz (2008) summed up some of these critiques this way:

The idea that we've moved to a post-racial period in American social history is undermined by an avalanche of recent events. Hurricane Katrina. The US Supreme Court's dismantling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the resegregation of American schools. The Clash of Civilizations thesis that promotes the idea of a War against Islam. The backlash facing immigrant workers. A grotesque prison industrial complex. (para. 14)

Research I have conducted with Anthony Brown (Smith & Brown, 2014) further highlights the ways in which media portrayals of the 2012 Obama reelection emphasized an American electorate that is increasingly polarized along racial lines.

As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two, a number of scholars concerned with the role of race in schools and society have argued that historic moments that, on the surface, may suggest racial progress, in fact cloud the nation's collective vision of race and racism. Bonilla-Silva, an outspoken critic of the post-racial possibility – what he calls “new racism” – suggests that Whites stand to benefit from minor racial advances by people of color that ultimately maintain the existing hierarchy. He writes,

Ignoring all evidence of the profoundly racialized system affecting most areas of social life and the fact that most blacks are still at the bottom of the well, whites

have pointed to several token black figures as evidence that the long arc of white racism is indeed tilting towards justice. (Bonilla-Silva & Ray, 2008, p. 177)

The extent to which the narrative of Barack Obama suggests legitimate racial progress in America or something more subtly pernicious is one of the central themes I took up in this dissertation project.

The construction of an Obama narrative holds particular importance for history and social studies educators charged with conveying that information to students and preparing them for the broader task of effective participation in diverse democratic life (Parker, 2003). Obama's historic *firstness* essentially guarantees his place within school curricula alongside other prominent African Americans embraced in formal school curricula (Alridge, 2006; Carlson, 2003; Kohl, 2007). How that narrative gets constructed and packaged into academic content will likely follow the nation's long history of using academic spaces to hash out political and ideological divisions (Evans, 2004; Thornton, 1994). Historical examples abound of schooling that expressly sought to *Americanize* children from non-dominant communities (e.g. San Miguel and Valencia, 1998). The production of history knowledge in schools, evidenced by historic and contemporary examples of the "official curriculum" of textbooks and other materials (Apple, 1992, 2004), has typically reflected the more nationalistic, "neo-nativist" "collective memory" approach (VanSledright, 2011) to schooling. And though debates continue over which figures to include and exclude from official school curricula, the overarching message of these curricula continues to reinforce themes of historical American progress and global exceptionalism (Loewen, 2007; Tyack, 1999; VanSledright, 2011). As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two, majoritarian narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) of American history tend to rely heavily on heroic figures to further these themes of progress and

exceptionalism, with the process of hero-making necessarily leading to half-truths, erasures, and the elimination of complicating details (Loewen, 2007, Trouillot, 1995).

The narrative about Obama, and how/if that narrative gets co-opted for political purposes, also has profound implications for students in the U.S. Whether or not President Obama's legacy suggests a post-racial turn, the magnitude of his presidency requires robust consideration. As Glaude (2010) notes, "We find ourselves in this momentous present, as American citizens – the beneficiaries of a grand, but deeply flawed experiment in democracy – confronting the novel in the form of our first African-American president" (para. 2). With Barack Obama's election and reelection, Americans are, in a sense, in the middle of a history-making enterprise. Schools, then, will have the responsibility of helping students to make sense of this historic moment. That process of sense-making, though, holds considerable weight for this nation's collective racial imagination and how students perceive the racial and sociopolitical climate in which they are living (Carter, 2009). As Prudence Carter notes, "I delight in the possibility of the social and psychological benefits that President Obama's representation of excellence and leadership might have on black and brown schoolchildren ... At the same time, I brace myself for the disappointment that will come when many Americans ... promote the idea that we have become a color-blind and racially-healed society" (pp. 287-288).

Despite the high stakes for students and for a collective national identity, history and social studies educators have typically failed to center discussions of race in their teaching (Chandler & McKnight, 2011; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Tyson, 2003). Of primary concern to the social studies discipline is the development of citizens for participation in a multicultural Democracy, a process that necessitates an understanding of how race and ethnicity operate in public life (Marri, 2005; Parker, 2003; Salinas, 2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As Kumashiro (2001) and others have noted,

the social studies may be the ideal educational disciplinary space for engaging students in a process of seeing and combating racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and sexual oppression. Thus, social studies and history teachers have significant influence in deciding how, and if, schools become places for interrogating issues like the politics of race in the U.S. in a meaningful way.

Nonetheless, teachers and curricula comprise only a portion of the educative process for students. Consequently, understanding the Obama narrative presented in schools may not provide a complete picture of how students learn about the president. Recently, scholars have begun to document the particular ways in which students interpret historical significance and engage in processes of historical thinking through the lenses of their racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Epstein's (2009) *Interpreting National History* provides a clearly explicated account of this phenomenon in the context of mixed-race American History classrooms in the U.S. Through observation and interviews of White and African American students and parents over the course of an academic year, Epstein's study found that the students of different racial backgrounds constructed very different theoretical understandings of historical narratives. Despite receiving the same history curricula, White students tended to frame American historical figures using terms suggestive of a "nation-builder" identity. Black students, conversely, generally saw these same figures as both "nation-builders" and as oppressors of non-White people in history. For the purposes of investigating how students make sense of the symbolic and/or material importance of Barack Obama, particularly with respect to racial differences, understanding the teacher and curricular perspectives may not suffice in accounting for individuals' racialized modes of interpretation.

Regarding the construction of public narratives of historic and historical figures, a significant body of literature exists that examines and critiques the majoritarian narratives and “hero” discourses that comprise much of these narratives in official curricula in history and social studies (Brown, 2010; Loewen, 2007; Takaki, 1993; Zimmerman, 2000). Particularly within the pantheon on African American luminaries, scholars have carefully analyzed and pushed back against the ways in which official histories alter, selectively remember, and even co-opt certain individuals for political purposes (Brown & Brown, 2010; Hall, 2005). In reflecting on Obama’s place within the roster of prominent American figures, I have drawn on this revisionist historical tradition (Zinn 2005; Takaki 1993) that seeks to reconsider conventional historical narratives towards the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives. This body of scholarship has centered heroic figures such as Rosa Parks (Kohl 2007; Carlson 2003), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Alridge 2006; Dyson 2000) and Jackie Robinson (Hughes and Bigler 2007; Robinson and Duckett, 2003) for greater scrutiny of how their legacies have been constructed, by whom, and for what purposes.

Unfortunately, little scholarship exists that sheds light on how schools and students currently have begun to conceptualize the 44th president or how Obama’s narrative may fit into patterns of cultural memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) and majoritarian metanarratives about race and American identity (Cornbleth, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Scholars have made initial forays into understanding what influence Obama’s election has had on students of color in particular, specifically with regard to improvements in academic achievement (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009) and students’ psychological wellbeing (Aymer, 2010). Conchas, Lin, Oseguera and Drake (2014) conducted research that included inquiry into how young African American males conceptualized race and racism in the Obama American Era, and several studies have

sought to critically analyze children's literature on the subject of Barack Obama (May, Holbrook & Meyers, 2010; Nel, 2010). Slate (2011) recounts the possibilities of using Obama's autobiography as a curricular tool to facilitate discussions of race at the post-secondary level. Of course, these studies only scratch the surface of the complex issues surrounding how students understand Barack Obama in the context of America's political and sociocultural climate and what significance those understandings have for schooling. We know little, for example, of how young people in the U.S. relate to President Obama the individual, or how they perceive Obama's biracial background, what Prudence Carter (2009) refers to as his "two-ness" (as opposed to singularly focusing on his *first-ness*).

These gaps in our collective understanding in the area of Obama, race, and American schooling have led me to develop the following questions to guide this research project:

- 1) How do high school students of color make sense of Barack Obama as racial and political figure?
- 2) What sources have informed their Obama narratives?

These questions, and the notion of Obama's significance to students, are not simply exercises in an examination of the symbolic. For those concerned with the social, political, psychological, educational and material circumstances of young people of color in the U.S. (e.g. Fridkin, Kenney & Crittenden, 2006; Grant, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tatum, 2003), the vicissitudes of race and race politics hold profound importance. For students of color, how they view Obama and the racial discourses surrounding his election may speak to how they see their own futures and what hopes they may afford themselves. As my students in 2008 were so fond of proclaiming, we've got a Black president now. What this achievement signifies, however, remains underexplored.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I lay out the sociohistorical definitions of race that provide a foundational backbone for this project (Omi & Winant, 1994) as well as the essential tenets of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) that guide the project theoretically and methodologically. I then bridge these theories of race in sociohistorical and legal-political contexts to the case of Barack Obama, spending time discussing Obama as a post-racial figure and Obama's own racial identity. I then bring my review into the education realm, touching on the extent to which race and Obama are taught in schools, Obama's connection to broader themes in the teaching of history and social studies, and the extant literature on Obama's influence on students.

Racial Formation Theory

As this project centers race as a theme and guiding principle, I draw on Omi and Winant's (1994) notion of "racial formation theory" to ground my working definitions of race and racism. Omi and Winant, like a number of other scholars (Goodman, 2008; Gould, 1996), reject a biological basis for racial categorization. Instead, these authors suggest that racialization involves a process of selectively choosing phenotypic features on human bodies as a means for establishing socially and politically negotiated meanings. While Omi and Winant note that our accepted racial categories are "at best, imprecise, and at worst completely arbitrary" (p. 55), they nonetheless recognize the centrality of these negotiated identities and groupings in determining a wide-ranging system of social stratification.

Omi and Winant (1994) offer a theoretical explanation for how race is made and operates. They write, "We define *racial formation* as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 55). These

authors suggest two interrelated aspects of considering the formation of race: social structures and cultural representation. Social structures refer more to the activities and policies of states and nations, while cultural representation speaks to how race gets lived, formed, created and re-created in the everyday world. A final key tenet of understanding racial formation is Omi and Winant's notion of a *racial project*, which they suggest provides an explanation for the link between race as social structure and race as cultural representation. "A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to organize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (p. 56). In other words, racial projects demonstrate the meaning of race in a particular discursive context, and how both everyday experiences and social structures are defined by or organized along those racial meanings.

As an illustration, and one quite relevant to my work here, Omi and Winant (1994) offer "colorblindness" as an example of a racial project. The idea behind colorblindness is that race can be noticed on the individual level but should not be acted upon socially or politically. Considering, for instance, the role of race in recent debates on affirmative action in higher education (Kennedy, 2013), one can see a conservative racial project in the form of arguing that a state cannot discriminate or award different status to groups based on racial categories. The belief that race has played a significant role in allocating resources and opportunities in the past leads some to argue that to offer race neutrality, or race-blindness, now is to condemn previously discriminated-against racial groups to further inequity (a more liberal racial project). In both the conservative and liberal racial projects, the meaning of race links directly to how it operates at a structural level, such as in courts, higher education, etc.

Essential to understanding these racial projects and their interactions to social structures are the ways in which current racial understandings have been shaped over

time. Omi and Winant (1994) note that current conceptions of race “are merely the present-day outcomes of a complex historical evolution” (p. 61). Others (e.g. Gotanda, 1991; Haney-Lopez, 1994; Harris, 1993; Marable, 2003) have similarly demonstrated the myriad ways in which modern conceptions of race have been made and remade throughout U.S. history, often in political and governmental spaces, as befit the needs of powerful Whites. Charles Mills (1997) proposes the notion of a “racial contract” in American life, a tacit agreement among Whites that parallels the theoretical social contract and shapes the interaction between states and citizens along racial lines. Writing on this notion of how race gets formed, Mills notes,

The account I favor conceives the Racial Contract as creating not merely racial exploitation, *but race itself* as a group identity ... “White” people do not preexist but are brought into existence as “whites” by the Racial Contract – hence the peculiar transformation of the human population that accompanies this contract. (p. 63)

Elsewhere, Mills draws on Toni Morrison’s book *Playing in the Dark*, in which Morrison suggests that “White” and “American” have long been synonymous terms in American public life, a notion that continues to influence public perception of Barack Obama (Devos & Ma, 2013).

As I explored how students made sense of their racial realities in an Obama American Era, Omi and Winant’s (1994) consideration of the malleable nature of race in history became particularly germane. Undoubtedly, Obama’s election has reframed the discussion on race in America, though the contours of this updated racial landscape remain contested. As Powell (2009) so clearly articulated in his analysis of modern colorblindness and a post-racial turn in American life,

It is a serious mistake to define racialization narrowly, only to then dismiss it.

There are more possibilities than the Jim Crow racial practices of the 1950s and 60s, the colorblind position, or post-racialism. We are in a space where our old way of thinking about race does not serve us well and can easily lead us to misunderstand the opportunities and challenges that are before us. (p. 801)

Understanding how students make sense of Obama or a racial project like post-racialism may require language that does not adhere to historical common-sense racial categories.

Critical Race Theory

These intersecting notions of racialization and education, colorblindness and racial progress in the post-Civil-Rights Era all touch on various aspects of a broad critical race paradigm in the social sciences (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Deriving from legal studies, critical race theory² (CRT) centers race and ethnicity as constructs for examining a range of social phenomena and has been used widely to examine the centrality of race in ordering educational opportunities for students in schools (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Scholars like Derek Bell and Alan Freeman, writing in the mid-1970s and from a position of distress with the slow pace of racial progress in the U.S., began to develop an approach to legal work that eschewed traditional approaches, preferring more pointed, radical critiques (Ladson-Billings, 1999). From this early work, a small cadre of legal scholars developed critical race theory as a method for centering race in research on legal studies (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado & Crenshaw, 1993). As originally defined by these authors, six elements define the CRT framework:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.

² I generally refer only to critical race theory and omit references to other group-specific critical theories like LatCrit and AsiaCrit in an effort to maintain a more general approach to how race operates in the lives of a racially diverse group of students. However, I do involve the literature from LatCrit and similar perspectives to supplement my understanding of the theories.

2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.
4. CRT insists on the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color ...
5. CRT is interdisciplinary and eclectic.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

While others have presented variations on these tenets of CRT, such as in Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) naming a social justice commitment as a central theme, or Allen's (2006) inclusion of greater emphasis on White supremacy and global contexts, the literature on CRT has broadly ascribed to Matsuda et al.'s (1993) original call for new methodologies and new priorities to work toward eliminating racism in the post-Civil-Rights Era. And while the theory had primarily been applied to research involving the experiences of African Americans, recent decades have seen an expansion of the use of CRT beyond the Black-White racial binary. A range of critical theories have arisen to address the particular experiences of other traditionally-marginalized populations, including AsianCrit (Teranishi, 2002), Native American-centered TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), and perhaps most germane to the population with whom I worked, LatCrit (Bernal, 2002), which again lends credence to the narratives of Latino/a storytellers and participants.

A central point in all CRT circles is the notion of *racial realism*, the idea that race has real – i.e. lived, material, tangible – consequences in people's lives (Allen, 2006). Delgado & Stefancic (2001) note that “racial idealists,” in contrast, see race and racism as

more symbolic, matters of discourse and representation. Racial realists may point to the incarceration rates for African Americans as evidence of continued racist structures in the U.S. (Haney-Lopez, 2010), whereas racial idealists may note the harmful portrayals of Latino/as in the media as a central challenge for racial progress in the country. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) do not privilege racial realism over racial idealism, or vice-versa, but they do note that how one chooses to see the issue of race – materially or symbolically – suggests profound implications for how one sees a pathway to progress.

Legal scholar Derek Bell's work helped establish the racial realism camp. Bell's (1980) examination of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, and the questionable circumstances that led the Supreme Court to unexpectedly grant racial equality in accessing schools, caused Bell to further the concept of *interest convergence*, an idea that has since become a central component of the CRT framework. Interest convergence, in the case of the *Brown* decision, suggests that the judicial system was moved to enact major changes to the nation's racial landscape, vis á vis striking down "separate but equal" schooling, because of other powerful interests, such as economic and foreign policies that temporarily aligned with the desires of those in the U.S. pushing for domestic civil rights advancements.

Dudziak's writing (1988, 2004) lent credence to Bell's assertion about the case of the *Brown* decision, citing substantial evidence that the government found it appropriate to desegregate schools only when it became advantageous for its Cold War interests to do so. As Bell (2009) summed up more recently,

Reform does not come because of the seriousness of the racial injustice, or the effectiveness of the arguments seeking reform. Rather, major racial steps reflect the outward manifestation of unspoken and perhaps unconscious conclusions by high-level policymakers that the racial remedies, if recognized in a proposed

policy, will secure or advance societal interests deemed important by the upper classes or the country as a whole. There is, in effect, a convergence of interests between what blacks seek and what white policymakers perceive they or the country needs. (p. 2)

Interest convergence comes to bear on a host of contemporary racial issues, a useful tool for analyzing the impetus for policymaking in the post-Brown era.

As a case in point, CRT scholars and racial realists have become quite concerned in recent decades with the discourses of colorblindness that permeate legal conversations and legislation. In the post-Brown era, many Whites, both liberal and conservative, have taken to the idea of colorblindness as a prescription to past instances of outright racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). That is, to allocate resources or opportunities along racial lines was deemed unconstitutional in 1954 and in subsequent civil rights cases, and so the natural governmental and judicial response should be to intentionally not see race in making all policy decisions. These tropes of race blindness also fit into a broader scheme of neoliberalism, through which racial progress is expected to be slow and incremental (Ladson-Billings, 1999). In the context of a race-blind environment, political conservatives may note the lack of biological basis for racial categories as justification for its dismissal as sociopolitically relevant. More liberal thinkers may recognize prejudices and discrimination associated with skin-color-based differences, facts of social life in need of reconciliation. In both cases however, liberals and conservatives fail to appropriately recognize the nexus of race and political power.

However, despite grand proclamations of racial progress, as Bonilla-Silva notes in his (2001) book *Racism without Racists*, few in the country could deny the continued disparities between Whites and people of color in a wide range of social, political, economic, educational and health-related indexes. In a country that has purportedly

moved beyond race, he argues, Whites have developed a new ideology to account for these racial disparities, an ideology he terms “colorblind racism.” As Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2006) note, “Whereas Jim Crow racism explained minorities’ standing mainly as the result of their imputed biological and more inferiority ...[today] Whites rationalize minorities’ status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their presumed cultural deficiencies” (p. 22). As Bonilla-Silva continues, this race-dysconsciousness, or colorblind racism, relies on the discontinued importance of race in shaping the opportunities of people of color in the U.S., a fiction particularly amenable to powerful Whites across the political spectrum.

Lani Guinier and others (e.g. Goldberg, 2009) have noted the role of liberalism in perpetuating racial inequities in the U.S. and contributing to the colorblind and post-racial discourses so prevalent today. Guinier (2004), also writing on the *Brown* case, describes how the legal defense deemed most likely to sway a White judiciary revolved around highlighting the deleterious effects of racial segregation on the psyches of Black youth, a strategy aimed also at garnering sympathy and guilt from the White middle class. The net effect of such a focus on protecting Black children from the damaging effects of segregation, however, was what she calls a national attempt to “treat the symptoms of racism, not the disease” (p. 99). That is, “Racial liberalism positioned the peculiarly American race ‘problem’ as a psychological and interpersonal challenge rather than a structural problem rooted in our economic and political system” (p. 100). This emphasis on “treating” the effects of racial hierarchies (i.e. segregation), instead of the causes (legal and government policies and structures), ultimately allowed the belief that racial preferencing of all kinds is equally discriminatory and that to eliminate the national focus on race, in favor of more free-market-based, “colorblind” ideologies, is to eliminate racism altogether (Goldberg, 2009). What follows from this liberalist ideology and the

belief in an incremental, free-market-based change, is the increase in opportunities for colorblindness. As Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011) write, “By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral’ while opposing all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality” (p. 192). With Jim Crow-era racism all but missing from American public life (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011), liberalism stands as the veritable antithesis of critical race theory in its attempt to rationalize and obscure the pervasive and continued racial inequities in the U.S.

CRT in education. Within education, a number of scholars over the past two decades have begun using CRT to theoretically frame their work (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). As Roithmayr (1999) notes, “The use of critical race theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education – knowledge, merit, objectivity, and ‘good education’ – are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of white supremacy and racism” (p. 4). Ladson-Billings (1999) highlights the fundamental connection between law and education in the U.S. and the relevance of a legally-based critical theory for examining nearly all aspects of schooling, including curriculum, instruction, funding, assessment, and desegregation. CRT serves the necessary purpose of seeing and critiquing the ways in which race defines and delimits educational opportunities against a norm of Whiteness and white property (Harris, 1993).

In their review of education literature that employed a CRT framework, Dixson & Rousseau (2005) found that much of the work focused on the fourth tenet noted earlier, the centrality of experiential knowledge in identifying and combatting racism. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) contend, “When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice ... they become

empowered participants, hearing their stories and the stories of others” (p. 27). These stories, then, alter the epistemological landscape of research in education, elevating the social realities of those who have experienced race and racism and edifying this experiential knowledge as valid and valuable in inquiry (Ladson-Billings, 1999). The stories, or counterstories that arise from this experiential knowledge serve to combat the dominant narratives about particular people or phenomena. This process of counterstorytelling acts as a weapon against majoritarian narratives, or those stories which hold the view that “majority culture and attitudes should hold sway” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 150). As Delgado (1989) notes, counterstorytelling serves both a constructive function in its ability to illuminate existing realities and a destructive purpose, in which new possibilities are offered. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) write, “The hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others” (p. 41). The work I present here relies heavily on the concept of stories, both broad public (majoritarian) narratives on political figures (i.e. Barack Obama) and on the personal (counter)narratives of young people of color.

Within social studies education, the uses of CRT to examine issues of pedagogy and curriculum have been present but more limited (Branch, 2003; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Bolgatz (2007) has noted how social studies as a field holds the potential to right the wrongs of a long history of racial oppression in the U.S., and Ladson-Billings (2003) has suggested that social studies and history could “become the curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us as a nation” (p. 8). While others in the field have begun to center race as a subject for inquiry (see below) and employ a CRT framework specifically, significant barriers still exist to seeing CRT applied widely in social studies education research. As Chandler and McKnight (2012)

note in their review of race research in social studies education, the field continues to ascribe to the very principles CRT seeks to combat in society, namely, curricular colorblindness, liberal incrementalism, and a general aversion to the caustic nature of race-focused discussions in general. As I describe in greater detail in subsequent sections, the multicultural education movement, with its celebration-of-diversity emphasis on racial issues, befits the race-blind ethos of liberalism and potentially undermines the hopes of critical race theorists in education (Chandler & McKnight, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

As a final, methodological note on this framework, CRT and other critical approaches do not prescribe a defined set of research methods (Sandlin, 2002); they orient the researcher to work that empowers the participants toward awareness, voice, and resistance of racism and oppression (Dunbar, 2008; Fernández, 2002; Smith-Maddux & Solórzano, 2002). Nonetheless, the tenets of CRT and LatCrit Theory do offer particular considerations for those developing research along these lines (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The ways in which CRT informs the methodologies of this particular research endeavor are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Three.

Obama in the Colorblind and Post-Racial Era

In the months leading up to the 2008 presidential election, and even more so in the days immediately after, popular media outlets were abuzz with statements tying the significance of Obama's win to grand declarations of national racial progress. Thomas Friedman wrote on the day of the election, "And so it came to pass that on Nov. 4, 2008 ... the American Civil War ended, as a black man – Barack Hussein Obama, won enough electoral votes to become president of the United States" (Friedman, 2008, para. 1). *Time's* Joe Klein noted that older forms of racial identity had now been replaced by "the celebration of pluralism" and "cross-racial synergy" (cited in Giroux, 2010). Dinesh

D'Souza (1999) had long proclaimed the "End of Racism" by the time *The New York Times* ran its November 4th headline, "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls" (Nagourney, 2008). Writing about Obama's significance in *New York* magazine, John McWhorter (2008) noted that "an entire generation of 10-year-olds will come of age having been barely aware of anyone other than a black man in the White House," (para 3), a fact he argued holds wide implications for changes in how young people of color will view Black identity and opportunity.

The narrative of Obama as the harbinger of racial progress in the U.S. has continued beyond the election and into his presidency. Conservative pundit Ron Christie (2013) cited the Supreme Court's 2013 decision to roll back elements of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as evidence "that America is making remarkable progress in trying to be post-racial." And more recently, on the 58th anniversary of Rosa Parks' famed arrest, the Republican National Committee noted through Twitter, "Today we remember Rosa Parks' bold stand and her role in ending racism" (Suebsaeng, 2013). In perhaps the most direct expression of post-racial ideology, *New York* magazine published a photograph of the president looking out from a doorway at the infamous House of Slaves on Goreé Island in Senegal (Amira, 2013). This (presumably staged) photograph of Obama gazing across the Atlantic from his slave-house perch, beneath the headline, "Photo of President Obama Perfectly Encapsulates Two Centuries of Racial Progress," underscores how an image both reflects and produces a post-racial narrative in public discourse. As Stuart Hall (1997) notes, events are given meaning only through (re)presentation, with the visual image serving as "the saturating medium of mankind." Images such as the photo on Goreé Island have no fixed meaning, Hall contends, beyond those meanings that are negotiated through political and ideological power. These instances represent only a small sampling of the many declarations, from commentators of different racial

backgrounds and on both sides of the political aisle, that drew connections between Obama's presidential election and dawning of a post-racial era.

As a concept, post-racialism does not signify the same meanings for everyone, and it parallels, though is not synonymous with, the notion of colorblindness. Bobo (2011) offers four variants or facets of post-racialism: 1) a relatively banal expression of hope in racial progress; 2) the obviation of the "black victim mentality" (p. 13); the dismissal of African American claims of racial discrimination; 3) the breaking down of the Black-White racial binary in favor of multi-racial, "beige" identities; and 4) colorblindness: "that we as a nation are ready to transcend the disabling racial divisions of the past" (p. 14). Powell (2011) further draws a distinction along political lines, with liberals furthering post-racialism and Conservatives clinging to a "race-blind" ethos. Powell cogently sums up the ideology that makes these beliefs in racial advancement possible:

The question of where we are with regard to race then becomes binary. We are either in a divisive space from the past where we continue to assert the dominance of conscious racism, or we are in a post-racial world where race really does not matter to most Americans. (789)

Thus, while Powell and others (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011) draw a distinction between post-racialism and colorblindness, for many, Obama stands as the embodiment of these neoliberal turns toward hiding race from public eye while seeming to embrace it (Goldberg, 2009).

With the wave of commentary on America's racial milestone in the form of Obama's election, however, came a counter movement that took issue with these claims of progress. The critiques of post-racial, or post-black, discourses have been numerous and varied. Some scholars have pointed to the overwhelming disparities between White

Americans and people of color in measures of incarceration (Alexander, 2010; Haney-Lopez, 2010), public health outcomes (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Tavernise, 2013), educational opportunities (Howard & Flenbaugh, 2011; Orfield, 2009), and economic security and mobility (Haney-Lopez, 2010; Selmi, 2010) as evidence against the plausibility of a post-racial turn in any material sense. Smith and King (2012) provide a thorough overview of these gaps in prosperity between racial groups, noting also the differentials in housing and accumulated wealth among Whites and African Americans in the U.S. Tesler & Sears (2010) have similarly rebutted this claim of post-racialism through quantitative measures, pointing to trends in voter polarization with respect to race, and the increased influence race had regarding people's views of Obama (more extreme racial views on both ends of the Obama-support spectrum) during the election of 2008 and into 2009. Scholarship on the persistence of voter biases through the 2008 election also signals the continuation of race-consciousness at the ballot box (Parks & Rachlinski, 2010). In the minds of voters, then, race has played out more profoundly with Obama's election, not erased its power in any quantifiable way.

Critics of the post-race narrative argue that these material disparities in the U.S. become obfuscated by tokens of progress and *mythical hope* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), such as Obama's election, that create a subtler, more discreet form of racial preferencing and oppression. The subtle racial trend has been variably described as *colorblind racism* (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), *laissez-faire racism* (Bobo, 2011), or part of Goldberg's (2009) broader notion of *racial Americanization*. Goldberg argues that the colorblind racism inherent in post-racial claims and policies of the "colorblind order" (Smith & King, 2012) fit into a more profound and far-reaching neoliberal project in the U.S., a return to social, political, and economic modernism. Goldberg (2009) is worth quoting at length on this subject of racial Americanization:

So racial Americanization is produced by seeming to do nothing special. This ‘doing nothing special’ consists of a mix of being guided by the presumptive laws of the market, the determinations of the majority’s personal preferences, and the silencing of all racial reference of crime and terror control. The latter silencing fails to distinguish between exclusionary racist designs and practices, on one hand, and redressive or ameliorative racial interventions, on the other, reducing the latter to the former as the only contemporary racist expressions worth worrying about. (p. 79)

Goldberg elsewhere notes that race has become veiled – privatized and pushed beyond the reach of the state – while simultaneously being re-centered in the name of strategic policing of suspected illegal immigrants and terrorists. Thus, race-blindness ultimately strengthens the grip Whites have in social, political, and economic spaces (Gotanda, 1991; Lipsitz, 2006; Mills, 1997). Omi and Winant’s (1994) notion of the *racial state* – wherein one recognizes the government as the central technology of racial ordering – applies to contemporary race politics as the state continues to regulate citizens (and non-citizens) along racial lines, but that process now takes place behind a government-sponsored veil of race-neutrality.

However, by emphasizing single actors, powerful Whites maintain control by providing the illusion of widespread progress (Goldberg, 2009). Thus, an event like Obama’s election may provide symbolic hope in racial progress, but that hope may belie conditions in America’s racial climate that change little for the millions of non-Whites not in the Obama family. In Derek Bell’s (1992) chapter “Racial Symbols,” his character Semple clearly articulates this false hope that ultimately makes racism more difficult to discuss. Reflecting in this case about Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, Semple says,

[The holiday] is just another instance – like integration – that black folks work for and white folks grant when they realize – long before we do – that it is mostly a symbol that won't cost them much and will keep us blacks pacified. (p. 18)

Semple's sentiments could easily apply to Obama's election: a historic moment that acts as a racial symbol aimed at creating an illusion of national progress.

One such element of Obama's election that may create such an illusion of progress is the number of Whites who voted for a Black presidential candidate in 2008 and 2012, a fact that allows such voters to believe in their own progressiveness and draw conclusions about the diminishing existence of racism in the U.S. As Nelson (2009) notes, however, White supporters of Obama should not confuse being non-racist with being post-racial. Whites voting en masse for a Black president does not directly correlate to the absence of racial inequity in the U.S. And while Whites voting for Obama may cause some to make post-racial proclamations, such an attitude may in fact suggest the opposite about the continued power of race in public life. While not necessarily political allies, legal scholar John A. Powell and conservative scholar and commentator Shelby Steele have identified the same trend in how post-racialism has, in effect, reified the power of race in popular discourse. Writing on what he calls Obama's "bargain" with Whites, Steele (2009) writes, "When whites -- especially today's younger generation -- proudly support Obama for his post-racialism, they unwittingly embrace race as their primary motivation. They think and act racially, not post-racially" (para. 8). And Powell (2009) notes, "The energy and need for race not to matter to whites in and of itself suggests that race does indeed matter" (p. 792). While drawing different conclusions about this theme, both writers essentially form the same argument: post-racial claims have the opposite effect of reinforcing the salience of race in America.

Obama's Racial Identity

Prior to his candidacy, Obama presented himself as someone who has wrestled with racial identity throughout his life – White and Black parents, Indonesian and Hawaiian homes, a brown-skinned boy raised mostly by Whites – and has ultimately come to welcome the plurality of America’s racial makeup rather than its differences (Fraser, 2009; Obama, 2004). Obama wrote in the introduction of his memoir *Dreams From My Father* (2004), “I can embrace my black brothers and sisters ... and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles” (p. xvi). As Kennedy (2011) notes, when Obama “decided to be black” he “made himself black enough to arouse the communal pride and support of African Americans” (p. 78) but not so Black that he befit negative stereotypes held by Whites and others. The multiplicity of Obama’s identity – his biracialism and complex heritage – reflects what Nelson (2009) refers to as “MiscegeNation,” a (possibly mythical) era and place characterized by the mixed-race identity politics of a racially diverse country. Whether it was simply due to his phenotypic commonality, the box he checked on the census, his marriage to a woman descended from slaves, his liberal policy agenda or just his intangible charisma, the Black electorate supported Obama in droves (Kennedy, 2011; Cetina, 2009) as the potential first African American to sit in the White House.

However, President Obama’s path to acceptance within the Black community has not been universal or without critique, particularly as he outwardly privileged race-avoidance over racial commitments. Sugrue (2010) argues that, prior to the Jeremiah Wright incident and Obama’s subsequent “race speech” in Philadelphia, Obama ran an essentially raceless campaign. Likely fearing he may alienate White voters with overtly racial sentiments, Obama generally offered universal social and economic policy options over those that sought the direct assistance of racially marginalized groups (Hill, 2009). Metzler (2008) suggests Obama made a Faustian bargain with American Whites: don’t

hold my race against me, and I won't presume you're racist. As Goldberg (2008) notes, Obama has understandably sought to "move beyond race," only to be "drawn rudely back, pushed and pulled from both ends into racial identification" (para. 28). For this president, a national election added a public dimension to his already complex racial identity, requiring him to make sense of not just the personal politics of race but the public politics of the image (Hall, 1997) as well.

There have been suggestions that Obama's maneuvering toward an ideological and racial center departs from (or betrays, depending on the viewpoint) an older form of Black politics, one that required more racially cohesive, radical antiracism from the political margins (Marable, 2010; Pitcher, 2010). In this way, Obama may have distanced himself from the likes of Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson and joined politicians like Mayor Cory Booker and Governor Deval Patrick as figures who work with and through their racial backgrounds, but not directly on behalf of those communities (Fraser, 2009; Henry, 2009; Hollinger, 2008). Cornel West, drawing again on the neoliberal critique of Obama's government, argued, "I think one of the worst things Obama did was to dangle a category of hope that came with the black freedom movement. ... He dangles that hope, when he's got neoliberal optimism as the content" (West & Ehrenberg, 2011, pp. 366-367). Others have taken Obama's varying racial commitments as opportunity to question even the authenticity of his claims to Blackness (Dickerson, 2009).

Obama's complex racial and cultural background has caused a wide range of attempts by scholars and journalists to make sense of and categorize the man with such a multi-faceted identity. Some have suggested that factors like Obama's biracialism, his descent from an African immigrant, and his inclusion in formal institutions of the American elite (e.g. Harvard Law School) signify a hybridity inconsistent with the typical Black life in America (Williams, 2008), what Bonilla-Silva (2004) calls an "Honorary

White” status, as opposed to fully White or “Collective Black.” Williams (2008) argues that Obama’s “non-indigenous” Blackness may have provided him an African American experience, but “As a non-indigenous African American, Obama remains loosely connected to the realities of race and racism that have impacted the collective social status and social psychology of indigenous African Americans” (p. 57). Obama’s hybrid identity transcends phenotypic racial categories into the symbolic realm (Hundley, 2008), with some even making reasonable claims that the president is effectively Asian (Omi & Lee, 2009). Alim and Smitherman (2012) have chronicled Obama’s linguistic dexterity, including his fluency in a number of versions of Black English, as further examples of the multi-faceted performed racial identity of the 44th president. The extent to which Obama’s racial multiformity serves as cultural and political hindrance or as capital remains up for debate, with voting patterns for Obama both confirming and complicating preexisting racial stereotypes held by voters (Devos, 2011). As bell hooks (2004) cautions, though,

“Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. (p. x)

Those who closely followed Obama’s 2008 election and early presidential years tend to argue that, as a politician, Obama failed to address issues of race and racism in any substantive, public way (Kennedy, 2011). Sugrue notes how Obama’s fears of becoming a “special interest” candidate required that he risk appearing ill-focused on race to his constituents of color rather than adhere to the stereotypical angry or threatening (Richeson & Bean, 2011) black male persona (see again hooks’ quote above). Instead, Obama offered the country race-neutrality by embodying MLK’s narrative of a “beloved

community”: people of all races coming together to fight injustice (Hill, 2011), what Cornel West (2008) refers to as a politics of symbolic hope (or “Hope on a Tightrope”). While I do not have the space to delve deeply into any one event, in those moments in the campaign and early presidency that offered opportunities for a strong racial stance, Obama essentially passed. Sonia Sotomayor’s “wise Latina,” comment, the Henry Louis Gates arrest in Cambridge, MA, Eric Holder’s conclusion about the nation’s fear of race dialogue, and even the now-famed race speech “A More Perfect Union” in response to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversies – each of these instances presented Obama with a chance for honest conversation with the nation about how race and racism operate in the U.S. but were instead met with hushed rhetoric or a retreat to politically safe themes of *e pluribus unum* (Enk-Wanzer, 2011; Hill, 2009; Kennedy, 2011; Teasley & Ikard, 2010).

Not surprisingly, critics of Obama’s raceless early presidency contend that to be neutral or silent in the face of persistent racial inequity is to exacerbate the challenges people of color face, to contribute to the post-racial myth. Williams (2008) argues that Obama’s lack of race-based anger allows American Whites to perceive racism as a problem of a bygone era. Drawing on the work of racial neoliberalism by Goldberg and others, Enk-Wanzer (2011) argues that in failing to articulate a racial agenda, Obama has “rejected race as a significant dimension of politics or society,” and in doing so, “bolsters racial neoliberalism, which is the very political project that underwrites the continued attacks against him” (p. 28). Critics view Obama’s race-neutrality as an active, though subtle, contribution to the neoliberal movement, undermining and passively abolishing race-consciousness.

Race in History and Social Studies Education

One element of this project sought to understand the role Barack Obama plays in formal curricular school spaces, particularly in the context of history and the social studies. The *what* of history, that is, the content, has traditionally been a divisive issue in public and academic forums (Evans, 2004; Thornton, 1994). These political and ideological struggles in the U.S. over what counts as necessary and appropriate history knowledge have been waged over no less than a fight to determine what it means to be “American” (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993). The nature of the debates has shifted over the past century, but one could fairly categorize lines being drawn between history curricula that is cohesive, patriotic, and universal on the one hand (advocated for by figures such as Lynn Cheney, Newt Gingrich, Arthur Schlesinger) and multicultural, open-ended, and self-critical on the other (e.g. Harold Rugg, Carter G. Woodson) (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993; Nash, 1995). Despite these tensions, official history curricula have typically sided with the more patriotic end of the divide, or what VanSledright (2011) refers to as the “neo-nativist” “collective memory” approach to schooling. Official curricula in public school classrooms have tended to present historical narratives that reinforce overarching themes of American progress, American exceptionalism, and the inevitable and linear march toward “getting it right” as a nation (Loewen, 2007; VanSledright, 2011).

Heroification and other challenges of inclusion. These narratives of progress and patriotism generally rely on a significant measure of heroification of historical figures, warranted or not (Hess & Stoddard, 2007; Kohl, 2007; Kent, 1999; Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008) and various other myths of public commemoration (Barthes, 2012; Flores, 2000; Hess, 2005; Lowenthal, 2011). As Trouillot (1990) writes, “The production of history thus involves necessarily the production of silences, erasures, preferences, exaggerations” (p. 19). The mythological figures that populate textbooks and formal curricula generally serve to uphold and perpetuate national ideologies such as persistence,

meritocracy, and equality before the law, even in the face of disputed or counterfactual information (Alridge, 2006; Hall, 2005; Loewen, 2007; Takaki, 1993, Zinn, 2005). In response to efforts to reform the history textbooks and the problematic narratives within them, Nash (1995) noted, “The deepest threat of the new social history has been that it raises the specter of a society that was seamlessly unified, never had an entirely common cultural standard, and never fully agreed upon what it means to be an American” (p. 45). Again, for many, the stakes are high in these contests over history curricula; the textbook stands as a symbolic and material “record of public truth” (Tyack, 1999) and speaks directly to sociopolitical and ideological debates about the very nature of Americanness (Apple; 1992; Nash, 1995; Zimmerman, 2004).

While the political struggle over curriculum continues to be fierce (see for example, recent debates over ethnic studies programs in Tucson, Arizona and the halting of the C-SCOPE curriculum in Texas), some inroads have been made across the country to advocate for and include more diverse perspectives and histories into history curricula that have traditionally centered only the experiences of White, English-speaking men in any substantive way (Banks, 1993; Carlson 2003; Loewen, 2007; Wills, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000, 2004). As Carlson (2003) notes, the increasing inclusion of women and people of color in American history textbooks stands as one of the few successes in an era otherwise characterized by a pernicious neoliberal takeover of American public schooling.

Despite these limited “successes” in diversifying history content, a number of scholars (Banks, 1993; Carlson, 2003; Vasquez-Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012) have argued theoretically or demonstrated empirically that such inclusion provides false hope. Multicultural curricula can, and often do, present superficial additions of diversity, treating multiculturalism as “tourism” (Lenski, Crumpler, Stallworth & Crawford, 2005),

(what an anonymous proposal reviewer of mine recently referred to as the “add-diversity-and-stir” approach). Anyon’s (1981) seminal work on social class and schools highlights the inequitable access to types of school knowledge available to students from varying socioeconomic backgrounds (see also Haberman, 1991). As a number of scholars have shown, simply including additional minority portraits in official curricula does not itself stave off misrepresentation, oversimplification, or inaccuracy (Alridge, 2006; Loewen, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000) or even the further marginalization of these groups (Brown & Brown, 2010; Hahn & Blankenship, 1983; Vasquez Heilig, Brown & Brown, 2012; Wills, 1996). Zimmerman (2000) has demonstrated how textbook wars throughout the 20th century may have brought Black and brown faces into the pantheon of textbook heroes, but the debates failed to interrogate the function of “hero-worshipping” as educational practice.

As Hall (2005) has noted, the narratives of particular historical figures can be manipulated to serve contemporary political purposes, evidenced in Texas by the requirement that students learn about prominent Latino figures like Lionel Sosa, a self-made millionaire entrepreneur, but not Dolores Huerta, the political Chicana activist. Again, mere inclusion of figures from diverse backgrounds does little on its own to disrupt the long-standing curricular trend of what Loewen (2007) calls “Whitewashed” individuals who have become nothing more than “melodramatic stick figures” (p. 29) after processes of misrepresentation, oversimplification, intentional exclusion, and political appropriation. As noted previously, the superficial treatment of race in history and social studies – be it through celebration-only discourses, preferences for palatable terms like “diversity,” and the myopic focus on heroic people of color – all fit into the broader project of liberal incrementalism and sociopolitical colorblindness (Chandler & McKnight, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006).

Barack Obama in the social studies. As one considers the teaching of Barack Obama, and the intersection of Obama and race politics, one must also consider the highly contentious, political struggles in which history/social studies curriculum gets debated and enacted. Obama's tenure as president has not completed, and so it may be premature to expect clear indications of if or how Obama is currently being taught – formally or informally – in social studies and history classrooms. However, the state of Texas' curriculum standards does require students to know the significance of 2008 as the year the nation elected its first Black president (Texas Education Code 113.41, c(2D)). Journell's (2011) study recounts classroom discussions on race (and gender and religion) surrounding the 2008 presidential election. Observing in six U.S. Government classes, Journell found all but one teacher blatantly avoidant of race discussions, even when students clearly saw the election with an eye towards race. For example, students in these classes expressed beliefs that Obama had a higher likelihood of being assassinated than other candidates because of his race, a subject most of the teachers glossed over in search of safer discursive territory. The teachers here tended to focus on the most benign of the racial implications of the election – i.e. Obama's firstness as an African American – and at times even suggested his presidency would herald a post-racial era in American life.

Journell's work parallels initial inquiries into how Obama's narrative may be constructed within formal curriculum based on prevailing media discourse on the significance of Obama's election and reelection (Smith & Brown, 2014). In this case, the authors noted emphases on post-racial discourses – and even more discreet versions of the post-racial paradigm after 2012 – as the predominant curricular foci around Barack Obama. Similarly, in their analysis of Obama biographies for young learners, May, Meyers and Holbrook (2010) found a widespread focus on a "lone-hero" narrative about

Obama, and Nel's (2010) analysis of children's literature on Barack Obama similarly saw trends toward heroification, and even deification in some cases. Nel concluded of the texts, "They also participate in what we might Obamafiction, or the fantasy that Obama's success portends the success of others and that his ascendance symbolizes a renewal of America's moral purpose" (p. 349). These early studies into Obama-related curricula parallel the critiques of revisionist historians and race theorists (Guinier, 2004; Loewen, 2007) about the portrayals of people of color in social studies and history learning.

Out-of-school social studies and history learning. Despite the lack of formal teaching on Barack Obama, and the avoidance of race-related topics during Obama-related discussions in classrooms, such an absence may not suggest that students are wholly unaware of Obama's presidency or even the racial politics involved. Barton and Levstik (2009) note that students engage in history learning socially and as part of a cultural community. That is, students' in-school learning (through textbooks and other formal curricula) does not represent the whole of their historical knowledge. Seixas (1993) and others (see Yeager, Foster & Greer, 2001) have shown how students' historical understandings are often comprised of significant levels of family history and lore. A number of studies have also attended to the prevalence of history learning coming from outside media, film, Internet, and other popular culture sources (Barton & Levstik, 2009; Schweber, 2006; Seixas, 1993; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat & Duncan, 2007). Of course, this trend of gaining historical knowledge through entertainment outlets comes with the inherent dangers of misinforming or misinterpreting historical events (Flores, 2002; Pewehardy, 1998) or even desensitizing students to the significance of issues by placing them in the context of film and television (Schweber, 2006; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007).

Recently, scholars have begun to document the particular ways in which students interpret historical significance and engage in processes of historical thinking through the lenses of their racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Epstein's (2009) *Interpreting National History* illustrates the ways in which White students and students of color can draw different conclusions about United States from the same history curriculum and the same teacher. Epstein attributed these differences in interpretation of the same material in part to the significance of the Black students' homes, which often served as sites for learning of alternative texts and histories related specifically to the experiences of African-Americans. Levy (2014) similarly found that student understanding is combination of history and heritage and that students can have a strong identification with social studies and history narratives that are unexposed in classrooms. As these findings relate to absent or misleading teaching of Obama, students – and perhaps students of color in particular – may interpret these silences differently than White students and/or may receive significant education on the subject from home or community sources.

Learning Race in Schools

The challenges to learning race in schools. Within education, the need for increased attention in schools to notions of race has been well documented (Banks, 1993; Howard, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006). Scholars have expressed an impetus for such a focus on race and ethnicity in a variety of ways, including through discussions of the particular (often marginalized) experiences of racial minority students in schools (Bigler, Arthur, Hughes & Patterson, 2008; El Haj, 2007; Nieto, 2008; Tatum, 2003), the inevitability of racialized events on school campuses (Brown & Brown, 2011; Journell, 2011; Lewis, 2003), and the *Demographic Imperative* (Boutte, 2010; Howard, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), which speaks to the growing racial/ethnic disparity between

mostly-White U.S. teachers and the increasingly non-White student population. Others have touched on the racelessness of official school curricula (Apple; 2004, Kumashiro, 2001; Loewen, 2004) through textbooks and school standards (Branch, 2003, Journell, 2009; Loewen, 2007; Vasquez Heilig, Brown & Brown, 2012), as well as the necessity of a race-conscious schooling experience for students of all racial backgrounds (Howard; 1993; Wills, 1996).

Despite the overwhelming body of writing in support of a multicultural, race-conscious formal education, in-service and preservice teachers demonstrate widespread resistance to assuming such an orientation in their practice (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). White teachers in particular employ a range of techniques aimed at opposing, contradicting, avoiding, and opting out of discussing race with students in schools (Bell, 2002; Leonardo, 2002; Marx, 2006; Picower, 2009; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005). The silencing of selves, students and curricula (Castagno, 2008; Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 2000) has the potential for profoundly damaging effects on both White students and students of color (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo & Rivera, 2009; Tatum, 2003; Wills, 1996). Social studies and humanities classes may provide the ideal curricular setting for educators to address race through the course content, but there too teachers demonstrate resistance, or lack of know-how, toward attending to how race operates in the U.S., historically and today (Chandler & McKnight, 2011; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Skerrett, 2011). As bell hooks (2003) cautions, “Simply talking about race, white supremacy, and racism can lead one to be typecast, excluded, placed lower on the food chain in the existing white-supremacist system” (p. 27).

Some of the existing literature on race in classroom teaching describes moments in which teachers sought to affirm students’ cultural and racial identities through an

inclusion of racial subject matter into the curriculum. Particularly at the elementary level, the introduction of racial content in history and literature lessons has yielded fairly sophisticated student conversations about Whiteness, racial literacy, and individuals' racial/ethnic identities (Bolgatz, 2005; Dutro, Kazemi, Balf & Lin, 2008; Husband, 2010; Rogers & Mosley, 2006). At both the elementary and early-secondary levels, a number of educators reported success in using folktales and other "ethnic" genres of literature to allow students to explore, and ultimately affirm, their own racial/ethnic backgrounds (Branch, 2004; Dutro et al., 2008). Conversely, Hollingworth (2009) notes the potential for race conversations at the elementary level to lead to potentially greater normalization of Whiteness in the curriculum when handled poorly, leading to forms of *dysconscious racism* (King, 1991) rather than antiracism. Banning (1999) has similarly addressed that, in classroom conversations on gender and race, teachers' discourse patterns can possibly reify Whiteness and exacerbate unequal classroom power dynamics.

Successes in learning race in schools. Educators committed to teaching about or through racial topics have found success in both affirming and complicating the racial literacies (Guinier, 2004) of students of color through culturally relevant pedagogy (Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Blum, 2012; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Irizarry, 2007; Martell, 2013). These scholars/educators sought to further students' perceptions of racial identity, in part by adding in intersecting and complicating notions of nationality, gender, ethnicity, culture, and the particularities of recent immigrants of color. Howard's (2004) study of a racially diverse middle school history class demonstrated that students eagerly seek out opportunities to discuss race in classroom settings and require help in making sense of their racialized daily life experiences. Other work has shown how culturally relevant pedagogy can be affirming to students of color, but an affirmational goal may be

insufficient in trying to scaffold students into seeing race at the structural, institutional level (Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011).

Presumably due to the whitewashed formal curricula (Loewen, 2007; Zimmerman, 2000) and teachers' general avoidance of controversial or "taboo" subject matter (Evans et al, 2000; Levstik, 2000) a number of educators and scholars seeking to teach students directly about race have done so outside the bounds of the traditional classroom environment. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2006), for instance, recount their experiences teaching students about racial stereotypes and internalized racism during a summer extracurricular course, an article that offers readers suggestions for using hip-hop media to teach about racism (see also Gosa, 2011). Stovall's (2006) work similarly presents an account of a researcher-educator teaching students about race in a non-traditional setting. In this case, Stovall employed critical race theory and media images of race to engage students in discussions of broader racial issues in a course offered through a Chicago non-profit organization. Bell's (2010) work on counterstorytelling also provides a significantly different set of strategies for understanding and combatting racism. Students of color in this New York City high school used storytelling to explore personal racial identities, voice, and power towards combatting racism (Roberts, Bell & Murphy, 2008). Dimitriadis' (2000) exploration of the film *Panther* and the KKK with African American students at a community center, and Brooks, Browne, & Hampton's (2008) use of a Sharon Flake novel to discuss race and gender with high-school-aged women of color are two additional examples of educator-researchers capitalizing on less-strictly-policed curricular spaces to engage in race discussions through history and ELA content. Rather than drawing broad empirical claims, each of these studies used their particular pedagogical methods – hip hop, media criticism, book clubs, and

counterstorytelling – as a model of one methodological entrance into the challenges of teaching about race.

The teachers in Bolgatz’s (2005) study, written about in her book *Talking Race in the Classroom*, also capitalized on the curricular flexibility of a somewhat non-traditional setting – in this case an alternative school for students at risk of dropping out of school – to integrate race-related content in their humanities courses. The teachers in this study approached race teaching by intentionally including racially-oriented subject matter (such as reading Cervantes’ “Poem for a Young White Man ...”) as well as by providing space for conversations about racially-charged issues as they inevitably arose, such as in the case of an impromptu student debate on the racist (or not) nature of the Cleveland Indians’ baseball team name. The two teacher-subjects in Bolgatz’ book created an environment conducive to discussing race and racism by setting clear expectations with students on acceptable types of talk, structuring seminar-style classes that fostered student dialogue, and normalizing race talk themselves by bringing in personal stories with racial implications. The students in these classes exhibited some forms of typical resistance to discussing race at times, and the discussions themselves were often cut short, pushed aside, or inadequately connected to larger themes of structural racism. However, these students did engage in discussions of race and racism consistently and honestly. As Bolgatz concludes, “If we are willing to slow down our conversations, we can take student’s apparent backpedaling or avoidance as an opportunity to examine the subtleties and complications of racial issues” (p. 112). While the students in these classes did not make profound leaps in their levels of racial literacy, they nonetheless began to develop the vocabulary and habits of mind to access racial interpretations of the world moving forward.

Blum's (2012) book *High Schools, Race, and America's Future* recounts another example of direct race teaching outside the typical social studies or ELA classroom. Here, Blum reflects on three years of teaching a high school elective course explicitly on the subject of race and racism. With significant time to dedicate to the topic, Blum's curriculum included an in-depth and methodical exploration of institutional and structural racism, touching on race as a biological fallacy, the historical trajectory of racism and slavery in the Americas, notions of internalized racism, and other contemporary social and economic manifestations of racial difference. The book offers readers glimpses into student dialogue on race, as well as practicable resources for teachers such as the author's course readings list and assignment descriptions. In the book's conclusion, Blum underscores his students' ability to cross racial divides and engage one another in respectful dialogue, and to learn from one another's racialized experiences, as evidence of what he terms a "moral step forward" for diversity in schools.

Obama and the Raced Lives of Students

Despite the general racelessness of formal schooling practices, the lives of students of color are nonetheless characterized, and even defined by, their racial backgrounds (Tatum, 1997). A number of scholars in education have noted the various ways that schools create unsafe racial spaces, particularly for students of color, in which race and ethnicity as an identity marker and curriculum matter are generally ignored (Blum, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Valenzuela, 2008). Lewis, Chesler and Forman (2000) found that students of color in diverse college campus settings faced significant levels of racial stereotyping and pressure to assimilate to colorblind social and academic norms. Tatum's (1997) work on the identity formation of Black youth provides a clear explanation of the ways in which young people of color internalize feelings of otherness and race-based marginalization presented to them through formal (e.g. school

tracking) and informal (e.g. teacher attitudes) school structures. These young people must then develop an identity in response to this process of othering, including an oppositional stance that may influence academic and social relationships in schools.

Bigler et al.'s work with children leading up to the 2008 election found that students were generally aware of both the opportunity for all races and genders to become president and that White men have held this position in excess (African American children having higher awareness of the racial disparity). A significant number of students in this study attributed these differences to racial discrimination in America, and a noteworthy portion of the students believed that laws prevented people of color and women from becoming president. Interestingly, the researchers did not find students to feel that they themselves would be prevented from becoming president, regardless of their race or gender. The authors suggest that this finding is consistent with other literature that describes how young people tend not to feel themselves victims of discrimination, even when they are aware of such prejudices within their racial or ethnic group.

Within the field of social psychology, some researchers have begun to explore the direct impact of Barack Obama's election on students. Marx et al. (2009) have conducted initial research that speaks to a so-called "Obama Effect" on student achievement. These researchers demonstrated that African American students performed significantly better on certain assessments when they had had exposure to a notable event that spoke to Obama's achievements (such as a State of the Union address). These findings suggest possible support to the well-documented stereotype threat phenomenon (Steele, 1997) which highlights the relationship between achievement by women and students of color and individuals' perceptions that others expect them to fail. The "Obama Effect," then, may have the potential to reverse the effects of stereotype threat simply by employing

Obama as a role model. Aymer (2010) has similarly argued that Obama's professed challenges with his racial identity, his own maleness, and his paternal abandonment all resonate with many Black males, suggesting an opportunity for Obama to serve as a positive counter-model to the stereotypic image of the African American male that is so prevalent in public discourse.

Despite the potential psychological benefits for young people of color in having a Black president, the existing empirical work on Obama's effects on more racially heterogeneous samples is more mixed. For instance, Plant et al. (2009) found that a population of predominantly White college students had a dramatic decrease in implicit biases against Black people when they were reminded of Obama's African Americanness. In other words, "priming" students with associations of Obama as a political figure decreased the participants' feelings of racial prejudice. However, stressing Obama's race has not produced uniformly positive results. Devos and Ma (2013) found that participants who were reminded of Obama's race had decreased impressions of Obama's Americanness, with Obama falling behind Hillary Clinton, John McCain, and even former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in participants' assessments of how American each politician is. Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan and O'Brien's (2009) work with college students' suggested that beliefs in racial progress increased after Obama's 2008 election but that beliefs in the need for increased attention to race in America decreased at the same time. Thus, while some studies suggest that direct racial biases have decreased since Obama's election, those findings are not universal, nor are the effects of this lack of bias – i.e. beliefs in a decreased need for racial justice – necessarily positive.

The Obama Narratives

Much of the literature reviewed in this chapter is, at its essence, concerned with narrative, with making sense of the potentially profound change in America ushered in by Barack Obama's election. As Glaude (2010) asked of events such as the 2008 election, "How, then, do we account for those moments that fundamentally reorder how we understand ourselves and the world we inhabit?" (para. 1). The attempts at sense-making reviewed thus far have primarily reflected those Obama-related stories created by political pundits, journalists, scholars, and authors. Delgado writes, "The stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (p. 229). In the case of Obama and race, these stories may reflect the process of remaking racial definitions to fit a new reality in the form of a Black president, likely while maintaining power for Whites. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) add, critical race scholars have sought to draw attention to this process of racial storytelling, "to the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs..." (p. 8). Perhaps no moment since the height of the Civil Rights Era has provided a better glimpse into how this process of racialization is manifested than the election and presidency of Barack Obama.

As I have implied throughout this review of literature, those who influence popular discussion about Barack Obama have not come to any clear agreement on exactly what is the meaning of this man and his achievements. Or, to borrow Delgado's (1989) term, no single majoritarian narrative exists to describe Obama as a phenomenon. Rather, a host of overlapping (and at times competing) stories has bubbled to the surface. Some have framed Obama as a national hero (Vaughn & Mercieca, 2014), as emblematic of the quintessential American story (Marable, 2009), and even as a Christ-like savior (Nel, 2010). There are stories of Obama as the Great Unifier (Giroux, 2010), as a bold step

toward the promise of a perfect union and American exceptionalism (Glaude, 2010), and as the expression of a new “post-Black” politics (Fraser, 2009). Stories of Obama as a role model for youth of color (Aymer, 2010) and as the figurehead for normalizing multi-racial identities (Nelson, 2009) also fight for space in the public discourse on the 44th president. And of course not all stories have been similarly laudatory; narratives persist today of Obama’s foreignness (Hill, 2009), his *unAmericanness* (Samuelsohn, 2015), and even his not-blackness (Dickerson, 2007).

With such a preponderance of Obama stories – some more in line with the White majority views than others – sifting through to find the most apt, the most likely to reflect his true legacy, can prove challenging. The study I have conducted, then, speaks to this cacophony of Obama narratives by exploring how students of color accept, reject, or complicate these majoritarian narratives. Below, I describe the purposes for this study at the national, curricular, and individual levels. What unifies these levels of analysis, however, is an overarching search for the narrative, or narratives, that describes how young people of color imagine this president.

Justification for the Study

I close this chapter with a brief summary of how this Obama-related study fits into existing social studies education research as well as its points of departure. I have organized this justification around three levels of focus: the citizen, the curriculum, and the student.

The citizen. Within the social studies, citizenship education and preparing students for participatory democracy stand as central tenets of the field (Banks, 2004; Branch, 2003; Parker, 2003). The history of U.S. citizenship has historically been inseparably linked to issues of race and ethnicity, with the very definitions of inclusion and exclusion circumscribed by shifting racial boundaries and borders (Brown & Urrieta,

2010; Gotanda, 1991; Mills, 1997). Thus, those concerned with multicultural democracy – that is, countering a long history of disenfranchisement and disillusionment among women, people of color, and non-native English speakers – see education and formal curricula as areas for potentially bridging these citizenship gaps (Banks, 2004). As Banks writes,

Individuals can develop a clarified commitment to and identification with their nation-state and the national culture only when they believe that they are a meaningful part of the nation-state and that it acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural group and them as individuals. (p. 9)

The valuing of diverse backgrounds has typically not been a prominent feature of U.S. social studies education (Chandler & McKnight, 2011). Ladson-Billings' (2004) research found that students of color often don't view their own citizenship in the same way as White peers, preferring ethnic or cultural affiliations to general "American" views. Cornbleth's (2002) study similarly highlighted the differences along racial, ethnic, and social class lines, with students of color often less likely to express strong feelings of patriotism and the belief that the nation currently lives up to its pluralistic ideals. And Fridkin, Kenney & Crittenden (2006) documented quantitatively the significant disparity between students of color and Whites in various measures of civic engagement, including positive feelings toward government and opportunities to practice democratic skills. In effect, much of the research on students' civic engagement and political efficacy, their connection to what Banks (2004) calls a "democratic public community" (p. 12), remains largely tied to the long history of exclusionary practices imposed on people of color in the U.S.

The election of Barack Obama in 2008, for some, offered evidence that the tides of White political and civic domination had subsided (Marable, 2009). As quoted in

Chapter One, Obama himself suggested during his candidacy that his election would change the beliefs and hopes of millions of young people (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010, p. 72). However, little research exists that speaks to this possibility, that attests to the plausibility of symbolic, material, or psychological racial progress in the minds of young people. How Obama's election addresses the concerns of citizenship education and the hope for a multicultural democracy remains undocumented.

The curriculum. Another gap in our collective knowledge – one that I take up in this project – is if and how Obama is discussed in schools and outside. Journell's (2011) work addresses social studies teachers' avoidance of the issue of race in the context of the recent presidential elections. What racial knowledge do students have, then, of this president? Epstein (2009) and Cornbleth (2002) have each demonstrated how students of color can hold different, even competing narratives of America, informed by both in-school and out-of-school learning. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995) argue that the "question of school curriculum is also a question about the self, the American self" (p. 330), and, as noted previously, Toni Morrison contends that "White" and "American" have long been synonymous in public life. Recent survey data similarly confirms the conflation of White political figures with increased measures of *Americanness* (Devos & Ma, 2013). Thus, the issue of Obama's place within the official and unofficial curricular narrative of social studies and history touches on these overlapping visions of race, citizenship, and who gets to feel American.

The student. As I have pointed out throughout this chapter, a number of scholars have argued that race and ethnicity are not supplemental ways of understanding the American identity but may be, in fact, *the central organizing principles* of public life in the U.S. (Goldberg, 2002; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994). And while students similarly fit into this racial paradigm, with racialized ways of experiencing schooling,

curriculum, and even their early childhoods (Bigler et al.; Epstein, 2009, Lewis, 2003), teachers rarely allow for the direct consideration of race, even in the social studies, the discipline with the greatest potential for seamlessly integrating race talk into existing curricula (Chandler & McKnight, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2003). The research presented here builds from existing literature in the field that addresses race talk, race-focused curriculum, and racialized ways of knowing and learning in humanities-type settings (Blum, 2012; Bolgatz, 2005; Epstein et al., 2011; Stovall, 2006). This study, however, centers a recent milestone in U.S. racial history – the election of a Black president – as a tool for analyzing these themes of race in education. While scholars have begun to examine the academic and psychological impact of Obama on students of color (Marx et al., 2009) and hypothesize about Obama’s potential as a role model figure (Aymer, 2010), a need exists to explore and explain these possibilities qualitatively. How race looks in an "Obamerica" (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011) to a social justice-oriented educator and a class full of students of color may help the field, including teachers, administrators, and policymakers, understand the status of liberal multiculturalism, racial harmony, meritocracy, and colorblindness among those who stand to benefit, purportedly, from these post-racial ideologies. Finally, as I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, I hoped to use this research in part to provide a local benefit for my participants by creating space for racial storytelling (Bell, 2010) and for overt discussions of race, even at a political moment in which race has become increasingly difficult to name (Adjei & Gill, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical and methodological foundations of my study. I spend time describing the case study method and the forms and processes of the data collection. I also attend to how the conceptual framework – critical race theory – informs my commitment to participant storytelling. Finally, I begin my discussion of the particular challenges and considerations of conducting cross-cultural/cross-racial research and how my positionality as a White male researcher influenced all elements of this project.

Introduction

As a number of researchers have noted (e.g. Chikkatur & Jones-Walker, 2013; Koro-Ljungberg, Yendo-Hoppey, Smith & Hayes, 2009), the process of developing one's research agenda necessarily involves reflecting on how one's social positioning intersects with and informs all aspects of the research process, from the kinds of questions asked to interpretation of the findings. Within critical race theory, that imperative remains perhaps even more salient, as this research orientation privileges individuals' experiences as central to the inquiry process (Chapman, 2005). As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) reflects,

Thus CRT asks the critical qualitative researcher to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she is operating. My decision to deploy a critical race theoretical framework in my scholarship is intimately linked to my understanding of the political and personal stake I have in the education of Black children. (p. 272)

While my researcher lens undoubtedly differs from Ladson-Billings', my political and personal investment in issues of race and education similarly informed the project I conducted.

As a White male conducting research with students from historically underserved racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, my social location and its impact on the full breadth of the research endeavor required serious consideration. However, traditional research by Whites often fails to consider researcher positionality or falls into the trap of acknowledging racial orientation without fully exploring how that positioning comes to bear on all aspects of one's research. Drawing on Fine et al. (2000), Chikkatur and Jones-Walker (2013) note,

The recent legacy of ethnographic reflexivity often (re)establishes authority. Researchers merely list various social identities that might have influenced the research process rather than unearthing and remaining cognizant of the various ways their positioning and biases in relation to the study participants and spaces informed what they saw and heard and what sense they made of these data. (p. 832)

I open this chapter with a short autobiographical sketch in part to parallel the centrality of experiential knowledge in CRT research and in part to move beyond paying mere lip service to positionality (Cary, 2006). Instead, I touch on my biography as means for demonstrating a developing socio-professional identity and how my past experiences, particularly as a White teacher and teacher educator, inform my current thinking about research with students.

My developing critical researcher story. It's with a mix of embarrassment and empathy that I recall a particular moment during my master's program, a moment illustrative of the winding path of my developing White racial identity. In keeping with

the urban-education focus of this master's and credentialing program, our cohort of future teachers took a number of courses on issues of race, class, and gender and their influence on education. This moment I am referring to, planted so firmly in my memory, came well into our first semester. An instructor had just led our group through an activity in which we lined up and took steps forward or backwards depending on whether or not certain life privileges applied to us (e.g. "Take one step forward if you grew up in a two-parent household."). After a series of these statements and resulting steps forward or back, we were left with a visual representation of race privilege: White students generally standing toward the front of the room, and people of color farther behind. Lensmire et al. (2013) might refer to such an activity as a *ritual confession*, an exercise aimed at getting White students to recognize how they may have accrued race privilege not afforded to their non-White peers.

The specific moment I remember so clearly came during the post-activity debriefing session. Most of our 60-person cohort sat quietly, even uncomfortably, as Rachel, one of our more outspoken peers, argued with the instructor about the exercise and its relevance to her. White privilege was all well and good, Rachel pleaded, but in her case, her Jewish identity removed much of her privilege in U.S. society. It was unfair, Rachel argued, for her to be lumped together with the other Whites in the room with no such claim to an outsider identity, Whites who had likely never felt discriminated against or *othered* like she had. Listening to the back-and-forth between Rachel and the instructor, I clearly remember – and this is where the embarrassment comes in – feeling smugly self-satisfied. As a Jew myself, I could have been in Rachel's position, advocating a losing cause against a growing chorus of professor and students. However, I had months earlier "accepted" my Whiteness and White privilege. I had considered how my parents' middle class status gave me countless advantages growing up in a small

Vermont town. I had admitted that my success at my rural/suburban high school in North Carolina had much to do with race – tracking into advanced courses, college counseling, high teacher expectations – and that my time as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina was blessed by the kind of race-ignorance only Whites in America can enjoy. In short, I had *gotten* White privilege and Rachel, engaging in all manner of “White talk” (McIntyre, 1997), clearly had yet to come around.

My newfound critical consciousness, developed primarily during this master’s program, did not, however, necessarily come with a clear path to action for this aspiring White educator. As our graduate program seemed to privilege those schools that were part of the “school reform” movement (Ravitch, 2010), I followed a number of my peers and found a job at a young charter school, this one in Washington, D.C.’s Parkside neighborhood. And during those early years teaching in Northeast, D.C., I struggled, perhaps unsurprisingly in retrospect. Many of my struggles paralleled what most new teachers face, particularly in urban schools: long hours and limited support, classroom management challenges and the trials of content coverage and standardized tests (Ayers & Ford, 1996). I was constantly aware of my Whiteness, then, too. As an outsider to this community, my introduction to the concentrated poverty and community policing exacerbated my feelings of a privileged White identity. Checking students’ bags each morning for weapons or contraband stood as just one stark example among multitudes that reminded me how different my school experiences had been from the harsh security and control inherent in this DC school. In my own middle school years, no teacher ever issued me a “demerit” for having an untucked shirt.

While it was at times difficult to find common ground considering our widely different backgrounds, one point of legitimate connection between my middle schoolers and myself was the campaign, and election, of Barack Obama in 2008. As I discussed in

Chapter One, my students displayed visible excitement over the prospect of having a Black president. After myself developing a serious aversion to the Bush administration and its interminable foreign wars, I had similarly been caught up in the Obama fervor. Around that time, I joined friends in canvassing nearby towns, giving some of my limited hours out of the classroom to Obama's campaign. And like so many liberals, I think, I saw a great opportunity for the nation to take a collective step forward, politically and socially, in electing an African American to the presidency. I stood on the National Mall on a frigid January morning, along with hundreds of thousands of others that Inauguration day, feeling, for the first time in my life, that I was witnessing a true watershed moment in U.S. history.

As I developed as a teacher and my handle on the profession strengthened, I nonetheless found myself increasingly uncomfortable with my practice and my place within these urban schools. Working mostly within the so-called "No Excuses" urban charter schools (Ravitch, 2010), my role as an educator involved vast amounts of time and energy aimed at controlling students. I participated in school structures that dictated how much students talked and how they walked and how they dressed and how they spoke to adults and how (or if) they used recess and leisure time during the day. Under the auspices of "providing a structured environment," I poured all of my energies into various systems aimed at determining, down to the student, down to the second, how children existed under my watch. It became clear, too, that my principals evaluated my effectiveness as an educator based on how high I could raise test scores and how silent I could keep my classroom. And I cannot claim innocence or victimization during this period. I had joined a sub-community of well-meaning White educators who saw this rigid environment and lock-step path to college as the only way to effectively uplift our students from the "Devil's Island" of urban poverty (Grant, 2011). To some degree, I saw

these hallmarks of the “no excuses” school – the school uniforms and 9-hour-days and college-preparation slogans – as all part of the singularly effective path toward educational success. For those first few years, I too believed in the work we were doing, in the potential for me to leverage my race privilege and my own record of academic success into greater advancement and mobility for my students.

However, my commitment began to flag. My frustrations started with the limited opportunities I had to be creative in my pedagogy – confined to what Haberman (1991) would call a *pedagogy of poverty* – and then spilled over to concerns about the usefulness and effectiveness of our behavior management systems, with the silent lines in hallways and complex behavior tracking systems. I also began to reflect on the unspoken racial implications of our work: the cultural ignorance of most of the teachers about the communities in which we taught, the mere image of White teachers marching groups of young Black and brown kids silently down hallways, and so on. It was, in short, a far cry from the caring and culturally affirming practices Ladson-Billings (1993) describes in her book *Dreamkeepers*. These racial and socioeconomic disparities were never addressed openly, however, not with students or families or even among the faculties.

Immersed in the almost militaristic rhetoric of these schools, I began to question my role in this whole educative process, wondering about my own motives for choosing to work in this community. Were we, as privileged Whites, seeking to assuage our own racial guilt or enact some process of “saving” these children of color from what we saw as their depravity? Would privileged White families consent to this harsh school environment for their children? These questions more than once landed me in the principal’s office like a contrite student, having to defend my commitment to the school’s mission. But, once I began to notice how fraught this whole enterprise was, how morally ambiguous (and increasingly difficult to justify academically), the less I understood about

the social justice education landscape and the role for interested but disoriented White educators like myself. If I could not feel at home in this “reform” environment, if these well-educated and liberal-minded Whites could not effectively educate urban middle schoolers, was there a place for White antiracist pedagogy anywhere?

I entered my doctoral program, then, seeking the time and human resources to explore some of these questions. And on the whole, I cannot say I necessarily have a conclusive stance on how Whites should seek to further educational justice and correct inequities without initiating a colonizing or self-aggrandizing ideology. However, my introduction to the notion of White allies and critical pedagogy (Apple, 2004; Hytten, 2007; Sleeter, 2001; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) as well as Critical Whiteness Studies in education (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Leonardo, 2002) have helped me to develop a stronger *racial grammar* (Guinier, 2004) to better interpret how race operates in American public spaces. In this graduate program, I have also spent considerable time teaching, researching and writing about the preparation of antiracist preservice social studies teachers. Along with my colleague, Ryan Crowley, finding ways to prepare our mostly-White preservice teachers has, as a process, continued the maturation of my own thinking on issues of race, Whiteness, and teaching. In keeping with the work of Lensmire et al. (2013) and Lowenstein (2009), we have begun to develop a more nuanced portrait of the White preservice teacher. Rather than focusing on how or why some White teachers resist learning about race in education or why they fail to interrogate their own Whiteness and privilege, we try to interpret the dialogue on race amongst these preservice teachers as part of a non-linear, often messy process of development and consciousness raising (Smith & Crowley, 2013). I now think back to Rachel, from my master’s program, whose struggles with Whiteness and identity I can now view sympathetically,

part of a complex process of *becoming* (Jupp & Slattery, 2010) rather than a fixed image of the racist White educator (Lensmire, 2010).

Through my teacher-education work, I have also started to reflect on my own preparation as an antiracist educator, and in particular, the focus on White privilege so common in teacher education more broadly. Lensmire and his colleagues from the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective (2013) have laid out a cogent argument against the emphasis on White privilege in preparing White teachers toward antiracist work. These authors note that a focus on White privilege often prioritizes activities aimed at soliciting “confessions” from Whites regarding their privilege, with vague implications that Whites should seek to shed some of these unearned advantages. Blum (2008) has similarly taken a critical approach to this focus on White privilege, noting the crucial lack of a connection between accepting White privilege and taking corrective action. Lowenstein (2009) argues against the homogenization of the “White teacher” that a privilege-based pedagogy implies, with the inherent assumption that all White teachers have received race privileges equally.

I mention these critiques particularly because they give name to a theme from my own biography. As someone who readily “confessed” to his privileged position as a preservice teacher, I was nonetheless left without a clear sense of where to take this understanding of my complicity in racial inequity, how to combat my unearned race privileges, or what that meant for becoming an effective teacher of students of color. As Lensmire et al. (2013) note, “In a bizarre way, the ritual of confession of white privilege...creates a space without room for much analysis or understanding” (p. 421) and also “narrows the political projects whites might take up” (p. 416). Lacking a connection to praxis, the emphasis on privilege ultimately led me into teaching positions that did not value the cultural wealth of students (Yosso, 2005), for instance, or center

issues of race, ethnicity, and gender in our pedagogy and curricula. Rather, in my own experience, centering White privilege set up a haves-and-have-nots binary and likely contributed to the savior mentality so many White teachers like myself bring to their urban classrooms (Titone, 1998). I by no means deny the existence of White privilege or even its potentially powerful effect in assisting Whites to consider issues of power in society. Rather, I mention the role White privilege played in my own life to complicate its usefulness as pedagogical tool. Learning through White privilege pedagogy may have stunted my development as an antiracist educator by allowing me to see “acceptance” as an end goal and failing to provide theoretical or practical directions to take antiracist action (and ironically, putting me in a worse position than Rachel from my master’s program, whose own struggles may have allowed her an easier transition to truly antiracist understandings). As Blum (2008) so clearly articulates, “Suppose we shift from the question, ‘How can I divest myself of White privilege in my own life?’ to the quite different question, ‘What can I do to make my society more racially just?’” (p. 319).

My identity as a White male aspiring to conduct antiracist research and teaching in education continues to develop. Moving beyond a racial identity rooted in White privilege, Jupp and Slattery (2010) have suggested a “second wave” of scholarship on positive White identities, including emphases on race consciousness and White identifications of *becoming* (rather than fixed notions of *being*). Throughout this research endeavor on race and education, I drew upon my winding path from naïve admissions of guilt in White privilege (Lensmire et al., 2013) to “White savior” practice in urban schools, to then questioning the very possibility of antiracist Whites in education. While still developing my identity as a researcher, I saw here an opportunity to center the experiences of both people of color (Delgado, 1989) and Whites (e.g. Jupp & Slattery, 2010) as a means for exploring nuanced expressions of how race operates in America and

Blum’s exhortation that we look for ways to make society more racially just. In this and future projects, I also hope, as Blum (2008) suggests, to provide spaces for students – including preservice teachers and high school-aged participants – to understand the connections between sociopolitical structures and racial hierarchies. I have taken to the Obama narrative in part because of how easily it connects to race as a structural phenomenon in this country, as discussed in Chapter Two. One contribution I can make, then, might be to help bridge this gap for students – be they high school students of color entering college or White preservice teachers entering schools – between individual experiences with race and the more structural forces that so powerfully affect schools and society in the U.S.

Again, my own story of developing a critical consciousness may demonstrate the connection between one’s personal experiences (e.g. my White privilege “acceptance”) and the broader sociopolitical context of those experiences (a neoliberal “school reform” movement with particular visions of the White Teacher and Urban Student). I by no means claim to have reached a fixed identity as an antiracist researcher or educator. Rather, I continue to cultivate that identification, seeking ways to positively contribute to challenging racism without reifying my own power or self-importance. One contribution I have tried to make with the social capital that comes with my White researcher status (Schultz, 1997), then, was to center race in my inquiry project and create opportunities for students to discuss the subject in school environments that often fail to take up the topic, what Weiss and Fine (2003) describe as “extraordinary conversations” in which historically underserved student populations gain a voice toward social critique. My hope was to facilitate students in exploring, as I continue to do, this connection between their raced lives and the particular racial-political environment that is the Obama American Era.

Critical Race Theoretical Framework

As discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two, my project draws paradigmatically and methodologically from critical race theory (CRT) and CRT in education. These frameworks implore researchers to acknowledge race, class, gender, and other social classifiers as central to the lives of people of color, both symbolically and materially (Fernández, 2002). When operating from a CRT stance, the central tenets of these theories discussed earlier – such as seeing racism as endemic, challenging dominant ideologies, and making a commitment to social justice – can be manifested theoretically, pedagogically, and/or methodologically, framing how one views all aspects of the project and what actions one takes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In short, CRT offers a set of priorities and perspectives on race and racism, leaving the researcher and educator some flexibility to apply those perspectives to a range of phenomena.

Some scholars in recent years have begun to articulate particular research methods that best fit the tenets of CRT. For instance, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) note how CRT's commitment to the centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color leads naturally to a research methodology that involves storytelling. Master narratives or "majoritarian narratives" about race in the U.S. – such as colorblindness or cultural deficits – get perpetuated through stories, what Omi and Winant (1994) might call a *racial project*. Putting these theories into practice, Hytten (2006) summarizes this critical educator/researcher position as, "Disrupting taken-for-granted, finding spaces for student voice and agency, and challenging the reproduction of inequitable practices, balancing both critique and imagination" (p. 230). Hytten's summary outlines, in a general sense, what I hoped to achieve in this research project.

In order to counter these commonsense (among Whites) narratives of race in the U.S., various scholars suggest the use of personal narratives by people of color –

biographies, *testimonios*, parables, composite stories – that provide nuance to otherwise flat explanations for the experiences of people of color (Bell, 2010; Beverly, 1991; Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Delgado (1989) notes that these stories, or counterstories, serve a constructive function in a society, raising consciousness and coalescing communities. The stories, too, can deconstruct the taken-for-grantedness of conventional race narratives. “[Counterstories] can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half – the destructive half – of the creative dialectic (p. 2415).” As research method, then, storytelling may provide the dual functions of humanizing participants and critiquing structures propped up by damaging race narratives.

Bell’s (2010) *Storytelling for Social Justice* provides a useful framework for thinking about how educators and researchers can use narratives toward antiracist ends. Drawing on the work of critical race theorists and Whiteness scholarship, Bell’s *Storytelling Project Model* centers race talk in pedagogical and inquiry spaces, creating small communities of learners engaged in reading, creating, and analyzing narratives of race and racism. Research on this process generally found students of color embracing the opportunity to speak about, and against, racism in their lives (Roberts et al., 2008). Dividing the stories into four categories – stock, concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming – Bell’s project offers a clear model for how one could introduce and insert and analyze various race narratives, such as post-racialism or meritocracy, into educational and/or public discourse. The final category of narratives, emerging/transforming, also provides a hopeful model for how young people could enact change through storytelling.

Epistemology and Positionality

Like those in the Constructionist tradition (Crotty, 1998), I see knowledge as something that lies in the interpretations of the individual, what Crotty calls “a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it” (p.10). As someone conducting research within this Constructionist or Interpretivist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) frame, I subscribe to the notions that realities are varied and held within the individual, that researchers and participants create knowledge together, and that one must conduct research in the world as it is, rather than create an artificial space for inquiry. Within this tradition, one may seek Truths, but the recognition of the subjectivity of that process, of the humanness of the endeavor of constructing truths, and the challenges of representation are all essential and guiding considerations (Banks, 1998).

While I hold these notions of knowledge construction and interpretation, I part ways with traditional Interpretivists when one considers the purposes of social science inquiry. Banks (1998) notes that in education research, as in much of Western social science (Chilisa, 2012, Delgado-Bernal, 2002), mainstream research paradigms have traditionally privileged “mainstream” students and disadvantaged students from minority cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. In opposition to this exploitive, colonizing inquiry approach, I subscribe to a more transformational (Mertens, 2007), emancipatory (Lather, 1991) or critical (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002) research paradigm. These critical traditions seek to uncover and disrupt the myriad ways in which societies delimit the resources, opportunities, and knowledge(s) of certain populations. Put differently, the critical researcher recognizes the disparities in the material worlds of traditionally subjugated groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and centers these experiences as part of a larger project of humanization and mutual understanding (Chilisa, 2012; Lather, 1986). McLaren and Kincheloe (2002) refer to a “critical form of epistemological constructivism buoyed by a nuanced understanding of power’s complicity in the constructions people

make of the world and their role in it” (p. 94). Engaging in critical research in this vein speaks to the constructed nature of knowledge among peoples within particular structures of power and oppression.

In considering a project that centers notions of race and equity, as well as one that involves young people of color, I recognize the social-emotional and historical implications of such a fraught endeavor. As Edward Said (1978) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005), among others, have noted, the very essence of research and knowledge building has historically been intertwined with broader projects of colonialism and imperialism. Smith notes that Western, White empirical systems of investigation and “scientific” categorization became tools for positioning non-White peoples around the globe as a helpless, non-human “Others,” thus legitimating the enslavement and theft of indigenous peoples and lands. The residual effects of this legacy of exploitive research practices continue today (Chilisa, 2012), with education not immune to such empirical oppression (Banks, 1998). Issues of research and representation, particularly in projects conducted cross-culturally, have the potential to perpetuate these aggressions against women and people of color, such as by creating an exotified “Other” as the subject of research (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007; Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002; Johnson-Bailey, 2004). Thus, my own ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations recognize, and depart from, this long history of exploitative research by people who look like me (White, male) on people who look like my participants. My views on knowledge production, meaning, and researcher subjectivities have developed in response to the horror stories of White, Western researchers taking from participants (Smith, 2005) and my desire to avoid such a self-serving and destructive process.

Epistemologically, my views align with those of Delgado-Bernal (2002), who argues for raced-gendered knowledge systems that emerge from the experiences of

people of color, “recognize[ing] students of color as holders and creators of knowledge” (p. 107). CRT research challenges the possibility of neutral or objective inquiry, placing instead an emphasis on the shared coproduction of knowledge between researchers and participants (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I concur, too, with Parker and Lynn’s (2002) discussion of the intersectionality of experiential knowledge, noting that race and racism do not exist in a social vacuum but instead collide and interact with gender, language, social class, and identity markers in developing the social realities of individuals. For critical researchers, obtaining new knowledge is not the end goal; what one does with that knowledge, with the participants, serves a greater purpose.

I also draw some of my axiological orientations from the work of those conducting indigenous research (Brayboy, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 1999). I cannot claim to fully assume an indigenous research methodology in my work, as my project departs from the traditions and practices of indigenous scholarship. However, I do subscribe to the axiological notion of *relational accountability*. According to Wilson (2008), indigenous inquiry requires the researcher to think first of his or her obligations to the participants, obligations that include wide-ranging respect for all parties, methodologies that humanize participants, and outcomes that benefit all persons involved. As Dunbar et al. (2002) write about interviewing (to which I would extend to all aspects of the research process), “The only *ethic* that properly applies in interviewing is one that accords the subject all the humanity he or she deserves” (p. 281). When a researcher employs a CRT framework, he or she endeavors, to some extent, to write “from the vantage of the colonized Other” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 65), a proposition that holds great ethical weight in the hearing and retelling of narratives.

I should note that indigenous researchers such as Wilson (2008) argue that one cannot add indigenous principles to pre-existing, traditional research paradigms. The

interconnectedness of the ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology preclude a researcher from separating out any one element from the overarching belief structure. However, Wilson does encourage researchers to build and articulate their own research paradigms (Chilisa, 2012) and Dunbar (2008) has described some of the common goals of CRT and indigenous research. Like Kaomea (cited in Chilisa, 2012), who weaves together various post-colonial, post-structuralist, and critical theories to best fit the needs of the project, I too sought to find ways to pull together those elements of theory that allow me to best serve my participants. In my case, that may mean taking an Interpretivist perspective on the fluidity and contextuality of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), a critical view of epistemology and experiential knowledge (Delgado-Bernal, 2002), a post-modern take on the need for reciprocity in research (Lather, 1986), and an axiology that focuses on care (Noddings, 1986), humanity (Dunbar et al., 2002); and the need for relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate how this hybrid critical paradigm maintains the centrality of race and racism while employing the humanizing theories of other post-colonial and post-modern movements. This orientation toward social justice and mutual respect should be evident throughout my discussion of methodologies and researcher subjectivities (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009).

Insider-outsider status. As a White, heterosexual, able-bodied, male, my position along the sociocultural axis of power skews toward the dominant and historically oppressive end of the spectrum. My research participants did not share my racial or ethnic background – all self-identified as racial minorities – nor my socioeconomic upbringing. With female participants there was, of course, a gender divide, and with all the participants, my status as a university researcher positioned me as clearly an outsider with regards to age and professional status. As Gallagher (2000) notes, the identities of researcher and participant are proscribed by situation, context, and relationship, thus

leaving open the possibility that other social signifiers (Twine, 2000) may influence a particular interaction or research environment. While racial and ethnic subjects are the primary focus of my research – and thus formed the central difference between researcher and participant – a host of other factors similarly complicated and colored my relationship to these students.

Though prominent as a classifying tool for researchers, the insider/outsider binary is generally insufficient for considering the complexities of researcher-participant relationships (Narayan, 1993). These statuses can shift as time and place change (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane & Muhamad, 2001), wherein racial group borders (my central interest) may give way in importance to class distinctions (Villenas, 1996), intersections of gender and race (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Stanley & Slattery, 2003), and the other multifaceted identities (Anzaldúa, 1999) students may present in classroom settings (Irizarry, 2007). Narayan (1993) has called for rethinking the insider/outsider designation in favor of more hybridized researcher identities wherein we acknowledge the shifts in relationships between researchers and participants as part of the complexity of real interactions, rather than as indicative of fixed notions of insiderness or objectivity.

Some scholars have critiqued the primacy of racial matching between researchers and participants, a trend that grew during decolonizing scholarship of the 1960s (Twine, 2000). William Julius Wilson for instance, argued, “There is no factual evidence to suggest that a sociologist has to be black to adequately describe and explain the experience of blacks” (cited in Twine, 2000, p. 9). Gallagher (2000) notes how White-on-White research presumes a level of synchrony that may not exist between researcher and participant, despite racial, cultural, and geographic consistency that may have suggested otherwise. Similarly, Young (2004) recounts experiences interviewing African American males with whom he shared a number of sociocultural markers. While the “racial

matching” and insider status should have allowed greater trust and dialogue between the parties, Young found that presumed commonality left too much unsaid. In other words, Young’s participants saw him as a peer and consequently felt no need to explicate various aspects of their lived experiences; the participants may have been more forthcoming and explanatory with someone who was unfamiliar with their lives. Others have noted that racial matching can lead to myriad issues when the agenda of the researcher conflicts with, betrays, or fails to authoritatively represent the researched community (Alexander, 2004; Islam, 2000; Villenas, 1996). These cases do not dismiss race as a critical factor in describing the ethical and relational considerations of cross-cultural research. Rather, I reference these works to complicate the picture of racial matching and to suggest that for both racial insiders and outsiders, the researcher-researched relationship is complex and constantly negotiated.

Some have sought to expand on the insider/outsider duality with broader conceptions of researcher positionality. For instance, Banks’ (1998) typology lists four roles of cross-cultural researchers, including the *indigenous insider* and the *external insider* (the latter best describing my own intention with this project). While it is important to locate oneself along this shifting continuum of insider-outsider status, the purpose of such reflexivity may be more for the sake of negotiating these challenges than avoiding or overcoming them. As Narayan (1993) describes,

To acknowledge particular and personal locations is to admit the limits of one’s purview from these positions. It is also to undermine the notion of objectivity, because from particular locations all understanding becomes subjectively based and forged through interactions within fields of power relations. (p. 415)

Despite the potential for harm, researchers with “outsider status” – in my case, White, adult, male – can conduct inquiry in unfamiliar communities. Johnson-Bailey (2004)

notes, “There are Whites who can negotiate the privilege of their whiteness and represent the ‘Other’ in ways that are generally accepted as accurate by the group, and there are those who are trapped and blinded by their privilege” (p. 138). As a counterexample, Gordon’s (2005) self-study highlights the ways researchers can perform a range of discursive acts aimed at preserving Whiteness and White privilege through all aspects of the inquiry process.

Engaging in this cross-cultural work, then, requires that researchers like myself interrogate their positionalities and constantly question the ways in which our backgrounds may affect the processes and outcomes of the project. How we as researchers are perceived in research contexts, then, requires consistent reflection on a host of personal and interpersonal factors and the implications these factors have on shifting, though ever-present, power dynamics. As discussed previously in my short biography, I carry with me a far different set of experiences with race and with Barack Obama than my participants. Thus, as I considered how the narrative of Obama has been conceptualized within this case study (see below), these differences of insider-outsider status dramatically influenced how each of us – researcher and participants – made meaning of the racial and political events of the Obama American Era.

The Context of the Study

The setting. The study took place at Winston High School, located in the affluent Northwest section of a mid-sized city in Texas. Winston is generally considered a high-achieving institution in both the district and the state, consistently earning the highest overall academic mark for state-level standardized assessments. Winston also benefits from national demographic trends for affluent, successful urban/suburban schools. At the time of the data collection (and according to the most-recent demographic report), the student body was 52% White (compared to 24.8% district-wide) and 28.5% economically

disadvantaged (compared to 63% in the district). Of the non-White students, about 30% were considered “Hispanic,” with Asian and African American comprising roughly equal parts of the remaining 18% of the student population (2012-13 Texas Academic Performance Report).

The setting for this study provides a noteworthy contrast to the particular focus of my research. The students in my case study were members of a cohort of students enrolled in an academic class at Winston entitled Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that provides structured academic support to first-generation college-goers. The program offers regular class meetings and course credit, assisting students with everything from academic tutoring and advising to college essay-writing support and field trips to local universities. The students with whom I worked were all seniors at the time, deep in the process of applying to universities and scholarship opportunities. While a few of the students in the class had joined the program more recently, the majority had participated for the past 4 years.

Two additional facts about Winston High School are relevant to the general context of my study. First, Winston itself has a noteworthy history in the city. The school is named after two prominent local Black educators, and opened in 1907 as school for African American students. In the wake of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, however, the school was ordered closed by a federal judge for its continued enrollment of predominantly Black students. In the early 1970s, the school reopened in its current location under the same name where it now serves a predominantly White, affluent student population (research journal, 3/5/14). One of the participants in the study, Ella, had a connection to the Winston High School history, as her grandmother attended the school in its earlier iteration as an African American school on the Eastside. Ella and her

family's connections provided an interesting bridge between the racial history of the school and its racial manifestation in the present.

Finally, Winston High School had the somewhat dubious distinction of being featured in a documentary film produced by a public media outlet in the early 2000s. The documentary, which had a national release, focused on portraying income inequality in the U.S. The scenes filmed at Winston – which the filmmakers used as the example of income inequality in school settings – feature poignant interviews with groups of students about how they interpret income differences on campus. In the film, the mostly-White students recount what kinds of cars they drive, the importance of wearing certain clothing labels, and the general belief that their social groups are the function of natural interests rather than socioeconomic status. The students who self-identified in the school as coming from working-class backgrounds (mostly students of color) describe their feelings of outsidership at Winston, and the strict divisions between themselves and their wealthier peers in all manner of social and socioeconomic measures. The film's implication in highlighting these wealth disparities, one could assume, is not to highlight Winston's exceptionalism as an especially segregated school but rather to note how Winston typifies the urban-suburban high school and the inherent wealth disparities within it.

The participants. The participants in the study were drawn from a cohort of seniors in the AVID program. Though the school itself sits in a fairly affluent urban/suburban area of the city, the majority of the students in the AVID class take advantage of the district's transfer program. Under the No Child Left Behind act, students attending failing schools were provided the opportunity to transfer to higher-performing schools within the district. In this case, most of the students traveled each day by public

buses from their homes in the northeast and southeast sections of the city to Winston located to the northwest.

Ultimately, I settled on 5 students from the cohort to work with as part of this case study. 4 of the 5 were in one of the two AVID class sections, with Adam attending the other class section. However, all 5 of the participants knew each other and had friendly relationships with one another. Despite the fact that he was in a different section of the course, Adam nonetheless showed up in the class in which I mostly observed on a weekly basis, and he met friends to each lunch in that classroom each day as well. The stories and perspectives of the individual participants are revealed in subsequent chapters. Table 1 below contains demographic data on the five students, including name³, sex, self-reported ethnic/racial identity, and grade level.

Table 1: Participant List

| | | | |
|--------|--------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Ana | Female | Latina | 12 th Grade |
| Ella | Female | African American | 12 th Grade |
| Ronald | Male | African American | 12 th Grade |
| Yareli | Female | Latina | 12 th Grade |
| Adam | Male | Palestinian American | 12 th Grade |

I chose not to make Jonathan, the teacher of this class of AVID students, a focal point of the research in keeping with my interest in the stories, knowledge, and perspectives of young people. However, it is worth touching on some of Jonathan’s own story as it relates to the context in which the research was conducted. I was introduced to Jonathan through a graduate school colleague and, upon meeting him, immediately found

³ The names of participants used here, as well as those of the teacher and school, are pseudonyms.

a kindred spirit. Well prior to beginning this research project, Jonathan and I had long talks over coffee about the state of education and our visions for school reform. We clearly shared many of the same views about the teaching of social studies, working with low-income students of color, and the challenges of enacting significant social change from the classroom. Originally from a White working-class family in a small town in Missouri, Jonathan gained his teaching certificate at his local state university campus and moved to Austin to begin teaching. At the time of the study, with 7 years in the classroom, Jonathan has risen to the role of Social Studies Department Chair, and a year before he was named the district-wide teacher of the year. Jonathan's award-winning status and his leadership role undoubtedly allowed for the professional autonomy to invite a researcher like myself into his classroom.

And while Jonathan's background emphasized social studies and history, he clearly felt passionately about working with students from less-privileged backgrounds. In this highly tracked school, he generally assigned himself the "on-level" classes (as opposed to honors or Advanced Placement), preferring the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the students in these lower-tracked classes. The AVID program appeared to capture Jonathan's greatest interest, as he devoted countless hours to working with his AVID students and the seemingly innumerable tasks required for administering the program, including fundraising, field trip and event planning, letter-of-recommendation writing, and so on. As just a single illustration of this commitment, my first informal interview with Jonathan took place at a concert venue downtown immediately after a fundraising event Jonathan helped to organize that benefited a local non-profit, an organization that helps low-income students, including Jonathan's AVID students, write poetry and song lyrics.

It was not until well into our working relationship, and after I had begun spending time in his classroom, that I discovered that Jonathan also had a strong connection to the subject of Barack Obama. Soon after moving to Austin, and even prior to Obama's decision to run for president, Jonathan and a friend started what they then called the Barack Obama Book Club – a somewhat comical response to being excluded from their friend's all-women's book club; both Jonathan and his friend were also already reading Obama's memoir *Dreams From My Father*. Jonathan and the friend then decided to open up their book club to the general public, making flyers and handing them out a local concert. Their first meeting, held at a downtown Mexican restaurant, drew 20 strangers interested in partaking in the Barack Obama Book Club discussions. The club's second meeting had 100 attendees. Not long after, Obama did in fact decide to run for president, and a campaign representative contacted Jonathan's Book Club co-creator about starting a Barack Obama election organization in the area. Soon thereafter, Texans for Obama was born, with Jonathan again co-leading the way in all manner of political campaign organizing. The experience culminated with a rally at an outdoor concert venue in the area, in which 20,000 people attended in support of then-candidate Obama. Behind his desk at school, Jonathan kept a framed photo of himself with his arm around Obama, taken at the end of this momentous campaign event (Jonathan, personal communication, 01/03/14).

Study Design

The purpose of this study, again, was to examine how students, and students of color in particular, have come to view the racial climate in the U.S. in an *Obamerican* era (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011) and what changes, if any, students saw in their own lives as a result of having a Black president. I was interested, too, in understanding the kinds of Obama narratives with which students had been exposed, both in school and out

of school, and how these students' particular school and home contexts may have influenced their views on race and Obama. To this end, I developed the following research questions to guide this inquiry:

1) How do high school students of color make sense of Barack Obama as racial and political figure?

2) What sources have informed their Obama narratives?

Case study. Because this research took place with a cohort of students in the AVID program, and specific school context also came to bear on the project, my topic lent itself to employing a case study orientation toward the research (Stake, 1995; Bogden & Biklen, 2007). As case study reflects more of the characteristics of a research population than a set of prescribed methods (Merriam, 1998), the case design left me open to employing those methods that befit my interests in a critical theoretical lens and my efforts to work within a non-colonizing, humanizing research framework (Chilisa, 2012). The case study was characterized as *single* (only one unit or case) and as *descriptive*, one that “offer[s] rich and revealing insights into the social world of a particular case” (Yin, 2012, p. 49). While my case does not adhere exactly to Yin’s (2014) notion of an “embedded” case design, in which one analyzes subunits of larger cases, I did pay close attention to how my case of students and their AVID class fits within the larger context that is the school itself. This cohort of students – considering both their coherence as a class of students within a particular program and their more symbolic separation from the school’s general population – provides a clear set of boundaries within which the case is contained, another necessary consideration in case study research (Yin, 2014). Finally, as Simons (2009) suggests, I approached this case study as an “emergent” or “open” design, wherein I made adjustments to methodology throughout the research process in response to unexpected events.

Data sources. During these class sessions, I generally maintained an observer-participant stance in which I focused on observing discussions among students and between teachers and students. I also occasionally took on a participant-observer role, as students sometimes chose to ask questions or involve me in their discussions. As I explain in greater detail below, I worked to establish familiarity with the students over the year, a fact that likely encouraged them to see me as a more active participant in their learning and consequently making difficult a removed, observer-only stance. Similar to Bolgatz' (2005) study of race talk in social studies classrooms, my goal was to remain as unobtrusive as possible but to shift into a more participatory role as became necessary during classroom activities. As just one example, students spent considerable time writing and revising college admissions essays and scholarship applications. The participants, as well as other students in the class, often asked for my assistance in helping to revise and edit these essays, a practice that their teacher Jonathan encouraged and I was happy to oblige as part of my commitment to maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with the students.

During these classes, I recorded observations in a research journal (Glesne, 2011) during each day that I visited the classroom. Glesne describes the research journal as a space that allows the researcher to record observations but also to consider issues of autobiography. She writes, "You take time to write thoughts that situate you within the data" (p. 77). I preferred this open-ended journaling format to more formal ethnographic field notes for two reasons. First, observations played only a small role in my data collection process, and so the research journal allowed me the flexibility to record thoughts and reflections from other elements of the research process, such as after interviews or while reading through students' writing. And second, Glesne notes that keeping a journal of one's field work "becomes a means for thinking about how the

research is co-created among you and research participants; how actions and interactions shape what follows, and where power dynamics lie” (p. 77). In effect, the research journal served as a way to ensure that my participation in the field, and my inquiry methods in general, remained aligned with the theoretical outline prescribed by CRT (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) and humanizing methodologies (Chilisa, 2012). I tried, in a sense, to use the journal to self-monitor the extent to which my research was reciprocal, dialogic, and equitably empowering by regularly reflecting on my practices and sharing the journal with knowledgeable peers who could provide methodological guidance and critique when necessary.

In addition to the research journal, I also collected artifacts from the class, such as relevant student writing assignments and images or writings that participants brought to me directly, such as Ella’s provocative Obama images or Jonathan’s campaign video. These artifacts, in conjunction with the research journal, played a supplementary, triangulating function in my data collection (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). The primary corpus of data came instead from audio-record interviews with students and the teacher. As Matsuda noted, the most effective way to find out what it is like to be poor and Black is to ask someone to tell about his experiences (cited in Dunbar, 2008). In this vein, my intention with these interviews was to privilege the importance of the students’ experiential knowledge (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) and the stories, or counterstories, that they wished to tell. I intentionally balanced the subject matter of these interviews, spending time discussing what participants felt were relevant topics (such as their experiences at Winston) and my own interests in Obama and the post-racial turn. Banks-Wallace (2002) notes that the interview process is fundamentally dialogic, a careful co-construction between researcher and researched in which both parties contribute actively to the process and bring their

own cultural backgrounds, ideologies, experiences, and worldviews into the storytelling/story-listening process. The somewhat unique angle that Banks-Wallace takes here is a focus on the psychological and emotional health benefits to the process of storytelling. Citing Sewall (1998) and others, she writes, “Each time we tell a story, it is an opportunity to feed another person’s spirit and plant the story’s wisdom deeper into our own souls. It is the power of the oral tradition” (p. 423). Thus, I sought to establish the interviews as opportunities to discuss the participants’ beliefs about race and Obama as part of longer narratives of their lived experience. I similarly shared pieces of my own story – as a researcher, as a White male, as someone interested in antiracism and education – within these conversations between researcher and participants.

The interviews generally adhered to a semi-structured or even open format to provide the most flexibility for students to tell their stories (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Simons, 2009). As Simons notes, open-ended interviews allow the greatest space for researchers to become privy to unobservable participant feelings and perspectives, and for the interviewees to even gain insight into their own lived experiences through these conversations. Due to the constraints of conducting interviews with students in schools and the potential for increased participant comfort and engagement (Chilisa, 2012), I sometimes scheduled small group interviews with students, trying to ultimately ensure that our conversations took place in the safest possible setting for individual students. Ultimately, I conducted about 2-3 formal interviews with each participant, with numerous informal, unplanned interviews taking place during class time or at other points in the school day, such as the lunch break. I also interviewed Jonathan, the teacher, twice in a formal setting to provide his perspectives on the students and some of the themes discussed here. I also kept record of our daily conversations in class on topics related to the project in my research journal. The interviews with Jonathan are primarily not used as

direct sources of data for this project, as I wished to center the views and perspectives of the students. Jonathan's interviews did provide invaluable contextual information, helping me gain insight into the students themselves, the politics of Winston and the school district, and his own perspectives on race and Obama that undoubtedly filtered into his everyday interactions with his classes.

Visual research methods. In following the lead of other prominent researchers concerned with how students construct personal and historical narratives (Epstein, 2009; Schmidt, 2013; Wineburg, 2001), I employed visuals in the collection of data collection. Harper (2002) has noted the potential for researchers to take a critical stance in their work through the use of a *visual sociology*. A number of scholars have used visual methods in education research, ranging from participant-created photographs that represent personal understandings, referred to as *photo-voice* projects (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Mitchell, 2008), to student-created self-portraits (Lightfoot, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1994). As inspiration for my own work, I drew heavily on Epstein's (2009) methods, in which students constructed historical narratives using photo cards, and Schmidt's (2013) geography research in which student participants drew maps of their school buildings, a source of data she analyzed independently and used as the basis for participant interviews. Thomas and O'Kane (1998) note that a number of the ethical concerns with conducting research with children can be mitigated through the use of hands-on, participatory methods, including production and analysis of data. Waldron (2006), writes, "Acknowledging children's capacity to generate worthwhile and meaningful data through participative research methodologies is, perhaps, the least challenging and most generally accepted aspect of democratizing research with children" (p. 90). While my participants may dispute the "children" label, Canela and Lincoln (2007) discuss the historical commonality of experiences as researched "Others" among

women, children, people of color, and other formerly colonized and marginalized communities.

During one of my interviews with each participant, I used a strategy called *photo elicitation* to spur students' thinking and discussion on these topics of race and Obama (Banks, 2001; Spencer, 2011). Prosser and Schwartz (1998) describe photo elicitation as the use of "a single or sets of photographs assembled by the researcher on the basis of prior analysis and selected with the assumption that the chosen images will have some significance for interviewees." These authors also note that such images can be strategically chosen by the researcher/teacher with the hope of inspiring responses or particular feelings. They write, "This approach ... does not draw on the ambiguous nature of an image but is purposefully provocative and disruptive and is intended to elicit suppressed views" (p. 124).

In my case, I gathered a collection of 35 images of Barack Obama, with a wide ranges of time periods, contexts, perspectives and even media. The images ranged from portraits of a young Barack with family members to President Obama with heads of state. The list included more candid photos, such as one of then-candidate Obama playing basketball, and cartoons, like the famed *New Yorker* cover drawing portraying Barack in Arab Muslim garb and Michelle Obama as a militant Black Power fighter. There were more laudatory images, such as *Jet Magazine's* cover photo of a dark sunglasses-wearing President Obama emerging from a limousine under the title, "Black Cool: The 25 Coolest Brothers of All Time." Finally, I also included in the roster a sampling of the many artist-manipulated images to be found online, such as a drawing that melded the portraits of Barack Obama and Abraham Lincoln to create a single face with characteristics of each man. I selected these images to provide a wide range of available visual portrayals of Obama with the hope of capturing as many elements of his identity as possible. Some

images, such as the Obama-Lincoln mash-up and *New Yorker* cover cartoon, were chosen to be “purposefully provocative and disruptive” (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998, p. 124) for my student participants.

Methodologically, I general showed the students these images one by one, allowing time in between for the students to ask and answer questions and to make judgments about representation (Clark-Ibañez, 2007). As a research technique, photo elicitation provided a common text through which students may have felt more comfortable discussing and attaching personal anecdotes or reflections. As such, I considered the dialogue around the images less in terms of the students’ particular analyses or interpretation of particular images and more towards sparking discussion and bringing to the fore more subtle or suppressed opinions. In each of these image-viewing sessions, after looking at and discussing each image in turn, I then asked the students to choose one of the images that best represented their own, personal impression or image of Barack Obama. The responses to this exercise, and the subsequent discussions, spoke to students’ general process of meaning-making of the president, the results of which I share in Chapter Five.

Establishing Participant Trust

Within this complex system of positionality and standpoint to the researched, there were ways that I tried to mitigate some of the most extreme effects of an outsider status. Foremost among these steps was to establish trust with my participants, a fragile but necessary element of the research relationship that may be fostered through *prolonged engagement* (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). I spent roughly a full academic year in the students’ class, usually visiting for two of their two-three class sessions each week (block scheduling at the school meant that class sections at Winston met every other day). When visiting, I generally acted as a resource for students, editing college essays and

helping them navigate online application processes. I sat with students individually and in groups to work on English papers and drawings for anatomy classes. Sometimes I would be conscripted to help with more personal matters, such as when I assisted a young woman in figuring out what to do with her stolen wallet situation and when I helped another participant call a local university admissions department to ask about missing paperwork. The relative independence of the class structure, in which students worked at their own pace on whichever tasks were most pressing to them, allowed me to provide support as needed and focus on observations in the times when students did not require my direct participation.

I also made sure to establish myself as a friendly classroom visitor who was outside the official school structure. My hope in this regard was to develop a positive rapport with students and a personal classroom identity as someone to whom they could turn for academic support but one who is not a teacher or administrator. To this end, I participated in class parties, playing word games and bringing snacks. I let students tease me about my unfortunate photo that showed up on my visitor's badge, and I dished it back out when appropriate. And I was sure to wear my visitor badge each time I come to the class as a means for establishing myself as separate from the school structure. I intentionally ignored behaviors in the class that I would normally address were I the teacher – students using inappropriate language, for instance, or using iPads to play video games instead of typing up admissions essays. I did not grant bathroom passes and generally did not bring my own computer to class, preferring to ask students for assistance in logging onto the classroom machines. This negotiation between being a support for academics and a definite outsider from the school community contributed to my efforts to establish trust with students and mutual respect without the professional distance that may have to exist between these young people and those teachers and

administrators who hold power within the school. I reasoned that being a trusted outsider would allow for the greatest ease of dialogue and greatest depth of understanding into how the school functioned. Finally, I no doubt benefitted from my friendship with Jonathan, their teacher, whom the students clearly held in high regard.

As just one example of how I saw this trusted outsider role come into play, Jonathan one day asked a young woman who sometimes worked in the classroom to give a presentation on her experiences with studying abroad during college. In her presentation, the woman brought forth a number of particularly troubling narratives about foreign travel. Through telling stories about her trips, most of which involved examples of the deficiencies of non-Western peoples and cultures, the young woman conveyed the message that, essentially, students should study abroad because of the chance to see the silliness of other cultures. It was a wholly offensive, Eurocentric, colonialist presentation, and the students clearly found the message discomforting. The following day, I had several, student-initiated conversations about the study abroad presentation, most of which became a true opportunity for discussions of race and power. The fact that students saw me as a trusted listener and conversation partner in making sense of this uncomfortable, even offensive moment, may have been evidence of my having established myself as a trusted figure, or even what Banks' (1998) calls an *external insider*.

Developing trust and positive rapport with my participants was one way in which I sought to lessen the restrictive effects of my outsider-ness. My other significant effort to bridge this racial/ethnic gap came through my efforts to make my own race present and visible throughout the research process. As Erlandson et al. (1993) write, qualitative inquiry is necessarily an intrusive process, and the researcher should not "attempt to insulate him or herself from the setting," but instead "seeks to establish relationships

through which the mutual shaping of constructions is a collaborative exercise in which researcher and respondents voluntarily participate” (p. 26). In this way, to engage students in a discussion of race and ethnicity in their lives without centering my own race would have been both disingenuous and unfair. If the research context is a collectively constructed enterprise, I could not ask something of the participants that I was not willing to give myself. Notable examples exist in education scholarship of White researchers acting reflexively on their Whiteness and reflecting on/interrogating the influence of their Whiteness in cross-racial educational and research situations (Blum, 2012; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Schultz, 1997). These scholars provide a helpful model for how to appropriately consider their own race without devolving into purely self-focused writing, as well as the need to continue learning about Whiteness throughout the research and teaching processes.

As Dunbar et al. (2002) note, self-disclosure is essential when interviewing participants, particularly with people from marginalized communities. These authors note that questions like, “who are you” and “why should I talk to you” will remain at the fore of any attempted interview unless the researcher provides “any reason that they should psychologically disrobe in front of strangers” (p. 291). One way that I tried to answer for my participants these trust-establishing questions was through the sharing of my own racial and professional narrative. I told students a version of the anecdote that begins Chapter One as a means for introducing why a White educator/researcher like myself might be interested in the experiences of students of color. In his work with life histories and teachers, Woods (1985) suggests that concerns over ownership, authorship, and ethics become lessened when both the intermediary and the narrator, in his case teachers, make a “joint investment” (p. 14) in the process and production of the story. Since I hoped to inquire about my participants’ racialized experiences, I also needed to be

prepared to disclose my own perspectives on race. I shared, for example, my development of a critical consciousness described at the beginning of this chapter and the questions I still had about the role of Whites in educating students of color. These anecdotes and admissions may have served to humanize me in the eyes of the students, particularly as I discussed my struggles and professional vulnerabilities with these students.

I also inquired directly with students how they thought race, and our differences in backgrounds, may have been affecting the research process. In one such conversation, Ella said that she definitely felt that she gave me a version of her opinions tailored for my demographic. “In all honesty, you probably are getting the answer for White guys, but I mean, you’re an adult though, so you’re a White adult, so of course I wouldn’t just say anything that came to mind” (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14). Here, Ella seemed to convey the notion that she constructed answers specifically with her audience in mind, in this case an audience with multiple characteristics – White, adult – that might influence the nature of her comments. However, elsewhere in that conversation, I asked Ella if she felt uncomfortable discussing race with me. She responded, “Not really. I don’t really see colors when it comes to [pause] discussing it. ... Because, I can kind of see, like, you seem very open and you like to listen.” Here, Ella suggests that she is open to having honest conversations about a difficult topic like race as long as her partner in the dialogue conveyed a willingness to judgment-free listening. This anecdote, and the other conversations of this ilk, do not in-and-of-themselves ensure a greater connection between researcher and participant. As Becker (2000) has noted, there is no key to developing productive dialogue in cross-cultural situations, but that “one crucial implication is that there is no general rule that tells when people who differ in these ways will be able to understand one another and when they won’t” (p. 251). My intention, then,

was to forefront the obvious differences between the students and myself rather than to ignore them and to potentially provide an opportunity for productive dialogue on the subject.

While being reflexive about my Whiteness and its influence on the research process undoubtedly occupied my thinking, both during and after data collection, I also tried to remain cognizant of not overly centering my own racial identity. Those concerned with Critical Whiteness Studies (Kincheloe, 1999; Leonardo, 2002) are careful to point out that a theory of Whiteness and White racial identity must tread carefully so as not to make Whiteness the focus of a discussion on race, thus diminishing or obscuring the experiences of people of color. Drawing on the work of Buford and Pattillo-McCoy (2000) and others, Dunbar et al. (2002) offer a caution against self-aggrandizing and self-serving reflexive accounts. These authors are worth quoting at length on this point:

Some reflexive accounts have been criticized for being too focused on the personal tales of the researcher or for dealing too much with self-therapy as the researcher engages in ethnic or racial narcissism and confessional tales related to mistakes made in the field rather than more directly addressing matters related to race, representation, and the reporting of data or its implications for social justice and validity. (p. 283)

As a White researcher, I attempted to walk a fine line: investing in dialogue without re-centering Whiteness, developing rapport with participants without making myself the research focus, and conducting race-related inquiry without falling into race-based personal therapy.

Trustworthiness of data. Again, my data sources consisted of transcribed individual and group interviews, artifacts from class, and observational notes/reflections made during class discussions. Through these multiple data sources, I tried to create a

more nuanced picture of the experiences of my participants. As Yin (2014) notes, multiple conversations with the same participants can act as multiple “sources,” each triangulating one another in rendering the narrative of the individuals. In following Marx’s (2006) work with White preservice teachers, I also provided my participants with transcripts from their interviews when feasible. Reading and reflecting on our conversations served multiple purposes, including member-checking for accuracy, as well as a means to spur further dialogue. On certain occasions, I used the transcripts to engage participants in the analysis process, inviting them to look for themes and patterns (Glaser, 1965) across their own data sources (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Again, my goal throughout the research process was to attend to the emotional safety of the participants and to view the project as a joint investment. As Connelly & Clandinin (1990) note, the mutual construction of research requires a relationship in which “both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories” (p. 3). Collaborating on the analysis provided one additional opportunity for the participants and myself to co-create the narrative, each of us bringing our own lens to the process.

In addition to triangulating data through multiple sources and conducting member checks to ensure authenticity, I also adhered to a number of other tenets of ensuring the trustworthiness of my data, as Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Creswell (cited in Glesne, 2011) suggest. Below I list some of these elements or procedures and briefly how I attended to each:

- *Prolonged engaged/persistent observation*: I spent about a full academic year regularly observing and participating in the class-research setting. I also attended certain related out-of-school events, such as the graduation ceremony for the AVID program.

- *Clarification of research bias:* As discussed throughout this chapter, I engaged in a consistent process of researcher reflection, including keeping a research journal for this purpose and discussing with students the ways in which my positionality may be affecting our conversations.
- *Thick description:* I worked toward developing Geertz' (1994) notion of "thick description" through the prolonged engagement at the research site and the depth of the participant narratives.
- *Peer review:* I enlisted the assistance of knowledgeable peers throughout the process to gain feedback on data collection, analysis, and writing, a process Miles and Huberman (1994) may term a *case analysis meeting*.

While the aforementioned cautions assisted with establishing trustworthiness of the data within the academy, I do recognize that fidelity to the participants' narratives and identifying/critiquing notions of race and racism were priorities for myself within this project.

Analysis

As Chilisa (2012) notes, one needs to balance the use of traditional tools of analysis with the more dialogic and reciprocal goals of CRT-based inquiry. Once I collected and member-checked these data sources, I analyzed them collectively to develop categories and codes within the data (Glaser, 1965). Miles and Huberman (1994) discuss a process of developing descriptive codes after the data have been collected (instead of during or prior the project) and then revising these descriptive codes as one generates additional categories of data. I also borrowed from these authors' recommendation for use of within-case data displays, such as event matrixes or ladders, which help organize the data and begin the process of developing relationships to the research questions. They write, "Valid analysis requires, and is driven by, displays that

are focused enough to permit a viewing of the full data set in the same location, and are arranged systematically to answer the research questions at hand” (p. 91). In concert with the participants’ reflections on the data, I looked for patterns and themes that arose from the categories and displays, as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest. The themes that I present in Chapters Four and Five arrived through this process of seeing patterns within the codes and categories.

Finally, in addition to considering how my positionality may or may not have ingratiated me to a culturally different community, I also needed to consider the ways in which my biography, including my developing White racial identity, influenced how I received information from my participants. As Denzin & Lincoln (2000) note, “Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act” (p. 21). All of my interactions with participants, and even alone with the data far removed from social contexts, were interpreted through this lens that is prescribed by the intersecting ethnic, gendered, racial, classed, religious, regional backgrounds in which I have been socialized (Banks, 1998; DeMarrais, & Tisdale, 2002; Stanley & Slattery, 2003). My interest in making race more visible (Guinier, 2004) in educational contexts undoubtedly came to influence how I interpreted my data and what patterns, themes, and conclusions emerge. I have made an effort to reflect on how my positionality may have saturated these aspects of the research process, a discussion I take up in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER FOUR: KNOWING OBAMA

“Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, *what they know independently of the school, and how they know it*”

(Freire, 2005, p.130, italics added).

In this chapter, I focus specifically on the theme of *knowledge*, considering the source and nature of students’ understanding of Obama-related content. This theme addresses the latter component of my two-part research question regarding how students have come to learn about or “know” Obama: *What sources have informed their Obama narratives?* In this chapter, I take up the notion of schools as spaces for Obama-related learning, followed by a thorough discussion of extracurricular sources of content on race and Obama. Finally, I draw some commonalities across the nature of the Obama-related knowledge that students possess, attempting to identify trends in their disparate ways of knowing the 44th president. Finally, I use these data to raise questions regarding the limits to a purely informal/extracurricular approach to learning about President Obama.

Limited and Limiting In-School Knowledge

Perhaps the most common, and potentially most dispiriting, finding that arose from the data on Obama-related knowledge was the reported lack of Obama-focused content⁴ in school. With each participant, I asked the student to recall times when his or her teachers had facilitated lessons or discussions on Obama, including some mention of his political or racial life. I kept these questions broad and open-ended, hoping to hear of

⁴ Throughout this chapter, I use the terms “Obama-related content” and “Obama-related knowledge” to describe a wide range of discussions, mentionings, and interactions involving Barack Obama. In following Epstein (2009) and Yosso’s (2005) work, I take a broad view of knowledge – both formal, curricular knowledge and more informal, extracurricular knowledge – and consider all forms together – curricular, community, experiential, familial – as legitimate content on the subject of the 44th president.

any and all mentionings related to the president, whether or not the students themselves deemed these moments as significant in some way. However, generally speaking, all five participants were unable to recall such an event. In some cases, my questions were met with blank stares or even uncomfortable silences, as though the lack of Obama-centered learning represented a failing within the participants themselves. Ana noted in a fashion typical of most responses on the subject, “I honestly can’t remember the last time we talked about Barack Obama here at school. I don’t know. It’s never brought up. Like in my government class or my economics class, like, it’s usually just bookwork” (Ana, personal communication, 4/2/14). Ella concluded that teachers chose to involve discussions of Texas Governor Rick Perry in place of presidential content, with Ronald similarly noting, “It’s all just old politics or Texas history” (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). In these interviews, I similarly felt awkwardness in even bring up President Obama, in some way sensing the unfamiliarity, and possibly even unfriendliness, of that subject within the school environment (research journal, 7/5/14).

To say that students could recall no instances of Obama-related content is a slight over-generalization. For the most part, though, students’ recollections of President Obama in class were limited to passing comments, such as the one Ella recalled from her government course.

We were discussing the Electoral College, so we weren’t really discussing Obama as, like, a president. ... We just happened to be talking about Electoral College and it just happened to pop up. ... But it’s never been like, what’s going on with the current government, and what do you think about what’s going with this? It’s never really been like a topic of discussion. (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14)

Ronald's only recollection involved hearing Jonathan, the students' teacher in this AVID class, chatting with other students about the time he and Obama took a photo together (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). Interestingly, Adam seemed to have internalized that one of the themes of his IB history course was the inclusion of current events as part of the content. When asked if he could recall times in which Obama had come up in class, he responded this way:

Adam: Well, I'm in IB History, so we have a lot of, like, we branch off and talk about today's things. ... 'Cause that's IB, they want to have you talk about it and say, you know, your viewpoint. So we talk about it in IB History.

Interviewer: At school?

Adam: Um, I mean [pause], actually not that much. (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14)

In this interaction, Adam explains that his class discussed contemporary politics (though he does not offer specifics), but Obama as a racial figure remained absent from the conversation. Not surprisingly based on the general lack of dialogue on Barack Obama, none of the participants could recall a time in which Obama had been mentioned in the context of race in a formal curricular space. Further prompting of specific courses (U.S. History, government) or topics (e.g. Obama's "firstness" as an African American, the birth certificate controversy) yielded similarly blank memories on Obama as a curricular subject, particularly within the previous two years of social studies courses (U.S. History and government).

Teacher silence. I have chosen to focus my inquiry here on students' experiences with race and Obama, and so the beliefs and attitudes of teachers took an ancillary role. Nonetheless, a final point on Jonathan, the students' AVID teacher, may shed light on the

curricular vacuum around contemporary politics in social studies classes. Over the course of the year that I spent observing in his class, Jonathan also did not mention Obama in any significant way. He did occasionally engage students in casual conversations about race-related topics, such as by bringing up a controversial race-centered statement made by an NBA owner and asking students such as Ella what they thought of this piece of news (research journal, 5/23/14). However, despite Jonathan's deep history with Obama's campaign and his continued political support of the president, little mention was made during class time. The only exception I observed was, as Ronald recalled, when Jonathan took the opportunity to show a few students a framed photograph of he and Obama taken during Jonathan's time as an event organizer for the 2008 campaign.

During an interview with Jonathan, I asked him to talk to me about his AVID class and, specifically, if he felt like he could teach differently with AVID; could he broach subjects in AVID that he might otherwise avoid in his U.S. History courses? He responded this way:

Um, not really. Like, I can talk to my U.S. History kids at about the same way. I have to frame it differently for U.S. History. I share a lot of my frustrations with the AVID kids about race and class. Like, I'll – they might get a rant on my political view, like a school policy that's politically charged or like a societal thing that I'm like, look at this! (Jonathan, personal communication, 5/11/14)

These two notions together – that Jonathan has a very strong connection to Barack Obama as a political figure on the one hand and that he feels free to have uncensored “rants” on race and politics on the other – both make Jonathan's Obama-less teaching all the more compelling. A few minutes later in our interview, Jonathan made a comment that may itself explain the contradiction. I was discussing to Jonathan my interest in Obama, preparing to show him the same set of images that I had shown the student

participants in our interviews. He interjected with, “Well, they’re so apolitical. They’re not a political crowd, yet.” In this case, then, Jonathan’s belief that his students are apolitical may trump the mountain of evidence – his personal-political connection to Obama, his curricular freedom in AVID and his predilection for liberal diatribes on race and social issues – that would have led one to believe that he would bring up the subject of race and Obama throughout the school year. This belief that students are not politically inclined yet may give name to why other teachers at Winston similarly elected to avoid Obama-related content. In other words, if Jonathan chose not to broach the subject, it seems unlikely that any teacher at Winston would.

Ending the conversation before it starts. In a couple of instances, participants recalled trying to initiate conversations about Obama and race, only to have those attempts brushed aside by teachers. In one particularly striking example, Ella recounted a time in which she attempted to privately engage a teacher in an Obama discussion outside of class. Ella had come across a somewhat provocative, artist-created drawing of Obama in a Christ-like pose and with a crown of thorns on his head – an image that piqued her interests in race, Obama, and religion. However, Ella’s attempts to engage her AP Psychology and Government teacher in a discussion of the image during a planning period proved unfruitful. “She said it was ‘just too much’” (Ella, personal communication, 5/8/14). Ella explained that she saw this image as an artist’s commentary on the overwhelming level criticism that Obama received because he is an African American, a hypothesis that she was unable to test out or discuss with the assistance of her social studies teacher.

Ella’s failed attempt at engaging her teacher represents a single, overt example of the ways in which the school suppressed the possibility for formal or informal learning on these subjects of race and Obama. Despite the fact that the Texas Essential Knowledge

and Skills (TEKS) standards required high school students in U.S. History to know the significance of the year 2008 as the date of election of the first Black president (Texas Education Code 113.41, c(2D)), the lack of direct Obama content, particularly concerning race, is unsurprising. This finding parallels Journell's (2013) study of a group of Chicago-area teachers' unwillingness to address race in social studies classes during the 2008 presidential election. In that study, Journell found consistent avoidance of racial issues, even when classes were engaged in discussing the election and Barack Obama directly. Hess' (2004) work on social studies teachers' struggles with embracing controversy in the classroom, and the well-documented avoidance of racial subjects by White teachers (Marshall, 2009) or struggles to discuss race in predominantly White school settings (Yeager Washington & Humphries, 2011) further supports the likelihood of avoidance in the case of Barack Obama and race as curricular subjects in a predominantly White high school.

Despite the evidence of schools as unproductive curricular spaces for Obama knowledge, students themselves frequently expressed a desire for knowledge on the subject, both of Barack Obama specifically and on current U.S. politics in general. In other words, Obama served as a compelling subject for the participants. This interaction with Ana and Yareli highlights the desire for Obama knowledge and an emphasis on current events:

Yareli: My mind's kind of like, not up to date with what's happening with [Obama]. I haven't really watched the news lately, so ... I'm always busy with work or school, you know. I don't really pay much attention to it ...

Interviewer: But I don't think a lot of people are talking about him.

Ana: I would be interested if they did talk about it.

Interviewer: You would?

Ana: Like, it's today's day.

Yareli: Yeah.

Ana: Who cares about what happened – like, it does matter what happened.

Yareli: It matters because it got us to like how we are now, like, our [pause] how like everything functions and stuff, and why we have certain rights and liberties. But, like, we've been taught this our whole life during, like, school. And I feel like it's important to focus on things that are, like, happening right now and that might happen in the future due to the things that are happening right now.

Interviewer: Yeah, I totally – that's one of the reasons I think I'm so interested in Obama is 'cause it's like, you know, it's going on right now. And I don't know [pause], I'm curious how much that actually ever gets discussed.

Ana: Ha. Never. (Ana & Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14)

In this exchange, both of the students admit to having limited knowledge of either Barack Obama or current events. Both, too, seem to place the blame for the paucity of content on the school, and history/social studies classes in particular. Most of the other participants similarly expressed an interest in Obama and contemporary politics, with Adam noting that he tried to stay relatively well informed with news on Obama's presidency and Ella, as will be discussed in greater detail later, also pursuing Obama-related learning on her own. Only Ronald called himself uninterested in politics, though as I came to learn, some of his actions in seeking out Obama through social media may belie this position. Again, this sub-theme confirms what Journell (2013) found in his study of high school classrooms during the 2008 election: on the one hand a heightened desire on the part of

students to discuss Obama, particularly with regard to his race and the possible physical danger he might encounter if elected as the first Black president; and on the other hand, a formal school environment not conducive to discussions of contemporary politics or the sociopolitical significance of having an African American president.

Powerful Extracurricular Sources of Obama Knowledge

As Cornbleth (2002) powerfully articulates, schools act as influential (though not exclusive) agents of transmitting metanarratives about American values and priorities. As one could extrapolate from the section above, Winston High School has conveyed to its students several tacit messages about the salience of race in U.S. society (minimal), the importance of understanding and contextualizing Obama's 2008 election (also minimal), and the potential for helping students make sense of their current racial and political realities (not the school's responsibility). The silence on, and silencing of, issues of race and Obama underscore a vision of the social studies rooted in avoidance (Chandler & McKnight, 2012) or what Barton & Levstik (2009) may call *identify* and *display* stances in history teaching rather than the more critical *analyze* and *respond morally* approaches. As Trouillot (1990) notes, writing history as a process typically involves the silencing of particular narratives. To account for the subjugation of certain peoples, Trouillot argues, historical narratives must be revised and rewritten to justify such troubling stories. The racial significance of Obama requires teachers and students to make sense of a racist American past (and possibly present); the silencing of such histories consequently allows these parties to evade uncomfortable racial narratives.

However, as Cornbleth (2002) argued, there is a central need for understanding what students *do know* about American history, or the racial politics surrounding Barack Obama in my case. There are pedagogical implications for determining students' existing knowledge, certainly, but such an investigation holds political and social value as well.

Consequently, I was less concerned in my inquiry in identifying particular gaps in students' knowledge of Obama, or disconnects between school curricula and student comprehension. Rather, I focused on an additive approach, looking for patterns across the kinds of knowledge students did possess. And while the specific facts and areas of expertise about Obama varied from student to student, there seemed to be some common sources of that information. This section on student knowledge of Obama is consequently organized by source in order to reflect these patterns.

Family. Considering the age of the participants, it is perhaps unsurprising that if students were to internalize content about Obama, that that information would derive from family interactions. Ana and Yareli both recalled hearing Obama discussed most regularly at home, as their families worked through the implications of the Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare." As Yareli recalled, "I didn't really pay much mind, but [my parents] were always talking about it. And like my mom would always remind my dad to tell him, like, we have to apply for this Obamacare and all that stuff" (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14). Notably, both Ana and Yareli assumed that Obamacare was an element of welfare, perhaps due to their experiences with government assistance and the bureaucracy associated with navigating those processes with their parents.

And while Obamacare may have an indirect relationship to race and the president, the students also noted a number of ways in which they received Obama-related messages from their families that dealt directly with race issues. For instance, when asked about places he had learned about President Obama outside of school, Adam immediately referred to his father.

Like, at first, when he first got voted into office, my dad was like, "Oh finally we have a minority president. It's like, it's about time." My dad, he got the newspaper for the first time he ever bought one, for whenever he became

president. He still has it in his room. He has it folded up in his drawer. He's like, "This is gonna be big sometime. You could sell this." (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14)

In this case, Adam clearly took note of his Palestinian-American father's reaction to Obama's election, internalizing the purchasing of a newspaper as an important symbolic act and the collective benefit to U.S. minorities of this history-making 2008 election.

Ana and Yareli similarly made strong connections between Obama's election and the discussion of his historic "firstness" among family members. In a group interview, these two both agreed that their parents were not up to date with current politics. However, when asked about Obama discussions at home, the two seemed in agreement on the matter:

Ana: Nope. They just point out that he's Black, so they think that the United States is being less racist.

Interviewer: Who says that?

Ana: My family.

Interviewer: Your family says that? What do they say?

Ana: They're not super into -

Interviewer: - Politics.

Ana: Yeah, politics or anything.

Interviewer: But they're into his race?

Ana: Yeah. They know, as long as he's - oh, he's Black, so now people have more respect towards, like, us, you know, brown-looking people. (Ana and Yareli, 4/2/14)

As in Adam's case, Ana and Yareli received limited specific content about Obama from their families, beyond mentions of Obamacare. However, the message of

Obama's symbolic importance for people of color, and the Latino community specifically, came through quite clearly from parents and family members. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, these family-derived beliefs in the racial progress heralded by Obama's election weighed heavily on some students' own understandings of the significance of the 44th president.

Ella offered the most robust case of learning Obama through family. On a number of occasions, Ella referred to hearing about or learning about Barack Obama from her mother and grandmother. Ella mentioned that her mom is "really cool 'cause she gives me [pause] like an article in the newspaper" whenever she came across Obama-related content (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14). Ella's grandmother, too, had been a consistent source of information, perhaps more so with regards to racial politics and African American history in general. In this conversation, I asked Ella how she had come to be a member of the NAACP, a fact she had mentioned offhandedly during a previous conversation:

Ella: I thought it was really cool because I had heard of the NAACP all throughout the news, and my grandmother spoke very highly of them, but I didn't know Austin had it's own, like, chapter ...

Interviewer: It sounds like you learned a lot from your grandmother about various topics about identity and so forth. What is that – can you tell me about that a little bit?

Ella: My grandmother, she's very prideful, I guess is the word I'm looking for. She knows what she wants ... She stresses the importance of teaching the youth. Like, what we came from so they can actually learn to appreciate so that we won't, in her words, de-evolutionize back into slavery.

Interviewer: Really?

Ella: Just because, she grew up in the Civil Rights Era in [this city], and the way [this city] is set up, it's separated geographically, and so integration was really kind of hard to do because if you wanted to integrate schools, you had to bus the kids everywhere. And so my grandmother was [pause] she went to school I think five years before they shut down the old [Winston High School] and opened it here. But I guess when she saw it and realized it really wasn't much of a desegregation; they just moved the school to the White part of town basically. It broke her heart and now when she views the youth of today on things like the Juneteenth celebration, um, she's, she's actually gone up to a couple of youth and she's asked them, you know, like do you know the significance of this day? And they'll stare at her blankly. "I have no idea; I just know that we come for the parade," and stuff like that. It kind of breaks her heart, and so she's kind of made it her mission to teach me. (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

In this segment of Ella's narrative, she clearly articulates the importance her grandmother places on understanding the history of the African American community in her city and on educating local youth on the subject, her granddaughter being no exception. Ella's grandmother's pride in her Black heritage did transfer over to Obama's election. As Ella noted later, "She loved her some Obama back in 2009" (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14).

Despite the home environment that imbued a level of knowledge and pride in both Obama and Black history, Ella noted how she found some of her family's opinions conflicting with her own, causing a sort of intellectual and emotional discomfort.

Regarding her grandmother's lessons on African American history, she recalled, "Some of her teaching kind of backfired. She always told me to watch my back from people of other races, which is why I was so closed off in the first place" (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14). Also, Ella found it troubling how her family sided with their church in criticizing Obama for his stance on gay marriage and his lack of commitment to the Black community:

I think, um, honestly with that, it kind of makes me unhappy with my family, in that sense, because growing up, they've always been very open-minded. Like to me, at least, they've always seemed so open-minded and will accept anybody and we understand all part of it. Because, my family is an interracial family. Like, we've got different races mixed in there, and everybody's really cool with like one another. Like, there's no tension. ... And just for them – especially my grandmother, honestly – to just be like, "Obama, he only cares about gay folks. He's only catering to the White folks, you know. He sold out. He sold out." ... And it partly had to do with the whole gay marriage situation, but then at the same time, it's because he didn't jump on and say, "I'm going to do this to fix the Black community, and I'm going to do that to fix the Black community." Like, he cares about everyone. He's the president. (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14)

In this conversation, Ella displays consternation about her grandmother's views on Obama. Ella experiences significant confusion and tension in hearing her family members, whom she holds in high regard, attacking both an individual (Obama) and a cause (gay rights) that she also supports. She notes, too, the hypocrisy in a multi-racial family failing to celebrate diversity in all forms. As in the case with Adam, Yareli, and Ana, learning about Obama from family did not take the form of direct lessons on an element of policy, government action, or even Obama's biography. Rather, the students

internalized their families' attitudes – excitement and relief for Ana, Yareli, and Adam and disappointment and critique for Ella – and had to make sense of these indirect social learning experiences on their own.

Media. During the course of our conversations, a number of the participants mentioned, usually offhandedly, having been exposed to Obama-related content through various forms of social and traditional media. Ella, for example, recalled that her mother saved every newspaper article she came across after Obama's 2009 inauguration (Ella, personal communication, 5/19/14) and that she and her mom had watched the 2013 State of the Union Address together, an experience that left Ella feeling proud that Obama was planning to “go it alone” with his policy agenda (Ella, personal communication, 5/8/14). Adam, too, remembered watching television coverage of Obama's presidency with his father, an avid consumer of CNN and Al Jazeera news outlets.

Ronald, who self-described his political interests as, “I don't really get involved in any of that” (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14), nonetheless clearly engaged with Obama-related material through media. At one point, we were discussing Obama's critics, and Ronald betrayed himself as someone with at least a passing interest in the president.

Ronald: I don't know why people scrutinize him. I'm not really supportive of any presidential movement, but I'm not – I just don't see why there's so much hate towards him.

Interviewer: You get that? Where do you hear that?

Ronald: Like, when I'm reading like straight-up comments and stuff. Like, Obama will post a picture of his dog or something, and it's just like, “Get this clown out of our office! He's ruining our country!” ...

Interviewer: Where would you see, like where would you come across a photo like

that?

Ronald: Like straight-up Obama's Facebook page.

Interviewer: Are you friends with him on Facebook?

Ronald: Yeah. Just liked him on Facebook.

Despite an initial claim of being apolitical, Ronald nonetheless admitted to having a connection to Obama through Facebook, a connection that Ronald himself must have sought out. Ronald also hints at the notion that Obama's Facebook page served as an interesting, albeit non-traditional, source of information on the president and his political climate, as individuals conduct political discussion in this social media forum.

Adam similarly recalled coming across artistic renderings of Obama on the Internet, and Ella mentioned seeing a doctored photo of Obama wearing two chains around his neck and the title, "#2TERMS," a play on the popular rap artist, 2 Chainz. And in a case mentioned previously, Ella brought into a class an artist's provocative drawing of a Christ-like Obama that she had found online. In discussing the image, Ella noted that "people overreacted" and "people blew it out of proportion" (Ella, personal communication, 5/8/14). When pressed to explain whom these "people" were that had reacted so strongly to the image of Obama, Ella said, "I would just read the comments online." In these cases, students participated in a form of dialogue on President Obama by engaging in online comments sections, reading critiques of the images and of the president himself. Students found dialogue on Obama in online spaces to augment the void of Obama-related content left by social studies and history courses in school.

Community. Interestingly, both of the African American participants discussed ways in which they were exposed to Obama-related content through specific community-based institutions. And while the commonality does not necessarily suggest a pattern,

both Ronald and Ella's experiences reflected complicated, even problematic sources of information on race and Obama.

For Ronald, one of the key places that he had heard Obama discussions, and Obama-race conversations in particular, was at his barbershop. He said, "That's just not a political scene, but he comes up and they just start talking about, like, politics, like they know what they've been doing" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). The end of Ronald's comment, "... like they know what they've been doing," hints at a significant measure of skepticism of his barbershop as a legitimate space for the discussion of race and politics. He expounded on this skepticism elsewhere in our conversation:

Like, people were blindly voting for him for the fact that he's Black, like they have no idea what he stands for. Like, the place I get my haircut, that not where you'd think they'd be discussing politics at all. But like when he comes around, they're coming around with like Obama shirts and like, "I voted!" Like, do you know what you're votin' for?

In this case, Ronald again critiques the barbershop as an appropriate place for expression of political sentiment. He also questions the legitimacy of the participants' Obama-related excitement, assuming that these individuals only voted for Obama because of his race and subsequently dismissing race as a worthwhile characteristic on which to base one's vote.

Ella similarly experienced fraught Obama-learning in a community-based organization: her church. For Ella, her deep ties to her church have in some ways challenged her identity and the role Obama played in that identity formation.

My church does talk about Obama, but it's not in a positive outlook like you think it might be, just because, um, his – I'm trying to figure out how to, my wording – when he was basically saying, I support gay marriage. When he did that, my church held onto that. And, like, we're not filled with hate towards Obama, but

it's they obviously don't agree with what he has done, and it's just from that little simple, like, him stating his own opinion. It's like, everyone's like, Oh, he's only looking out for himself now. And what's this world coming to? And it's kind of shocking to me because it's like, I thought we were supposed to be supporting him, and then when he did one thing we didn't like, now we don't like him anymore? I [pause], like what happened? (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14)

In this segment, Ella struggles with the critique towards Obama coming from her church community. Notably, she uses both the terms “we” and “they” to describe the church, clearly still placing herself within that space and also distancing herself from its positions. She continued:

Ella: I guess that was the biggest shock for me, because, you know, we support everybody who's Black. And then Obama makes one thing – like, makes one move they don't agree with and it's just like, he sold out and [inaudible word], what?

Interviewer: So how did you feel about it when your church, you know, was talking against Obama because of his support for gay marriage?

Ella: Well, it hurt me in particular because I'm bisexual. And, I mean, I haven't officially come out to members of my church, like my mother knows, but that's just about where that stops. Um, but it's just [pause] when they do things like that, it makes me feel like we're not really loving thy neighbor as God would want us to.

Here, Ella notes how the church, clearly a formative institution in her life and a significant component of her identity, expressed an anti-Obama, anti-gay-marriage stance. That stance, conflicting with Ella's own beliefs on these issues, apparently left her feeling disoriented and even betrayed. Ella talked later about how her church's

abandonment of Obama contradicted her understanding of the Christian doctrine of “loving thy neighbor” and Obama’s declaration that “everybody deserves to be loved.” These points of contention, and Ella’s ability to see the inherent hypocrisy on her church’s part, led her to admit, “But the fact that my church didn’t see it that way, that was a huge kind of blow to me” (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14).

Misleading sources. As almost a corollary to this sub-theme of extracurricular Obama knowledge, a number of the participants mentioned sources of Obama information that proved misleading or unhelpful in fleshing out students’ understandings of Obama’s political life and biography. For instance, while students used traditional media as means for gaining substantive Obama knowledge, a number of them had picked up misleading information from brief glances at magazine covers. Yareli and I were discussing a cartoon drawing of Barack and Michelle Obama, and the following conversation ensued:

Interviewer: But then there used to be all this talk about him, people were accusing Obama of being Muslim, of being a terrorist and so forth, so this cartoon was sort of making fun of that.

Yareli: His background.

Interviewer: Exactly. People thought that because he grew up in -

Yareli: Wasn’t there a point where, like, is he American?

Interviewer: You tell me.

Yareli: Because I remember this one time, in the cover of a magazine, I was shopping at [the grocery store] and, I don’t know if this was at the time he was president or he was like running for president, one of the two. And it was saying that he was, he wasn’t like born here, or something like that. I’m not sure.

Interviewer: But you weren't sure how that got resolved?

Yareli: No, I was just like, why is he running for president then?

Interviewer: That's true. You can't be president unless you were born here.

Yareli: But, I don't know if it's true or not. I just kind of saw it and ... (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14)

In this telling excerpt from our interview, Yareli recounted feeling somewhat perplexed by the magazine headline she had seen in the checkout line of the grocery store. While she seemed to have a sense that the U.S. Presidency requires a natural-born citizen, she nonetheless walked away from that experience feeling ambivalent about that fact of Obama's life, noting, "I don't know if it's true or not." Ella, too, remembered getting misinformation from the checkout line in the grocery store. She came to one of our interviews wondering about the truthfulness of a Barack-Michelle divorce, something that she had come across on the cover of the *National Inquirer*. And despite mistrusting the source, her "heart sank" when she saw that cover (Ella, personal communication, 5/8/14). In both of these cases, students did not turn to history or social studies teachers to confirm or discuss their newly acquired and ultimately untrue information, potentially a result of both students' feeling that school was an inhospitable environment for discussing Obama and other current issues.

Nature of Obama Knowledge

While clear trends emerged from the data regarding the sources of student learning on Obama and race, less apparent were consistencies in the kinds of information that they had picked up. Due in part from the lack of a coherent Obama narrative in schools, students were left to piece together their own, often spotty bodies of knowledge on the president.

A clear illustration of the wide range of knowledge on specific Obama-related content arose in relation to our discussions of the president's own race and family background, one of the key topics that I discussed with each of the participants. These discussions generally started while viewing the photos. Typically, we would progress to a posed photo of a young-adult Barack and his mother, Ann Dunham, standing side by side. In seeing this photo, the students would immediately ask if the young man in the photo was indeed Barack, which I would confirm. I would then ask, "Do you know who the woman standing next to him is?" From there, the conversations diverged in interesting ways.

Ella, who had clearly demonstrated the greatest depth of prior knowledge on Obama, correctly identified the woman as Barack's mother. In the following conversation, Ella explains her knowledge of Barack's racial background, the source of that knowledge, and even how she feels about mixed-race families:

Ella: Yeah, that's his mom.

Interviewer: How did you know that?

Ella: I did, I did a lot of research on President Obama in middle school.

Interviewer: Oh, you did?

Ella: Yeah, I was like, this is just so interesting. I have to read everything.

Interviewer: For like an assignment or -

Ella: No, just -

Interviewer: On your own?

Ella: Yeah, just on my own. I mean, I read an autobiography – not an autobiography, just a regular biography – that came out about

him, and I did a lot of research and I didn't realize, well, actually I kinda figured that his mom would be the one who is White, just because in most, in most interracial Black-and-White relationships, it's usually the chick that's White and the dude that's Black. That's just kind of how that goes. (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14)

Here, Ella hints at the deep personal interest she has in Obama as a curricular subject, evidenced by her reading of Obama biographies as a middle school student. She notes, too, that she had been aware of the president's mixed-race background and that learning about his mother directly only confirmed her suspicion about the race and gender breakdown of multi-racial couples. Again, Ella demonstrated herself as both a committed Obama student and a keen observer of how race is experienced in America, a form of knowledge rarely privileged as legitimate in in-school settings (Yosso, 2005).

On this same subject of Obama's racial background, the other participants held different understandings. Adam, for instance, said in regard to Obama's mother, "I didn't know which, you know, which one was which. I knew one of his parents were African American" (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14). The photo of a young Barack with his mother surprised Ronald. He said, "Yeah, I thought he was just straight Black" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). Ana also knew that Obama had a mixed-race background, though seeing the image of Ann Dunham surprised both she and Yareli.

Interviewer: Do you know who this is?

Ana: No.

Interviewer: Any guesses?

Yareli: His mom?

Ana: It's not his mom.

Interviewer: It's his mom, yeah ...

Ana: She's White!

Interviewer: Did you know that?

Ana: No. No. Now I do.

Interviewer: Did you know that?

Yareli: I didn't know that.

Ana: I know Obama's mixed, though.

Interviewer: You did?

Ana: But I didn't know, like, what she looked like ...

Interviewer: Do you know who this is?

Yareli: His dad?

Interviewer: It's not his dad, since his parents got divorced. But this is his step-dad.

Yareli: Is he Mexican? Latino?

Interviewer: No, he's not. He's Asian.

Yareli: Asian.

Ana: Right on! (Ana & Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14)

In this conversation, both Ana and Yareli demonstrate surprise in seeing Barack's mother. Both, too, find his mixed-race background of interest, as highlighted by their response to seeing a young Barack in a family photo with his mother and stepfather. Finally, Yareli's question about whether or not Barack's step-father is Latino underscores both the kinds of knowledge that the participants have of Obama's biography and also the personal lens through which the individual, here herself a Latina, interprets new information on the 44th president.

Beyond our discussion of Obama's own racial background, the students exhibited a pattern in their Obama knowledge only in the sense of being disparate and seemingly unrelated. There were notable trends in student knowledge, of course. Each of the participants made mention of election-era accusations about Obama's Muslim background, for example. They all similarly seemed aware of the pervasiveness of critiques in the political sphere leveled at Obama and his performance. But on the whole, the participants noted discrete bits of information, each interesting in its own right. Adam discussed Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his standing basketball game with the president. Ronald – the self-proclaimed uninterested and apolitical student – had significant recollection of each of the past first lady's focal projects while in the White House, even correcting me on Laura Bush's signature initiative. While looking at photos of Obama, Ella would regularly comment on the president's appearance, noting how his lack of grey hair in a particular image suggested it had been taken early in his presidency. Recognizing that Obama's grey hair had developed over the course of his presidency demonstrated, in Ella, a fairly substantive knowledge of how Obama looks, and has looked, over the past six years. Thus, while each of the students had internalized noteworthy pieces of information about the 44th president, one could not make the case that these disparate facts comprised a uniform body of knowledge or even followed an identifiable pattern.

Knowing Obama: Discussion

Despite a number of factors that may have signaled that Barack Obama would be a significant curricular subject at Winston – including IB social studies courses with an expressed emphasis on current events, a teacher with strong personal-professional connections to the president, and even a state mandate that students learn about Obama's 2008 election – the reality simply did not bear out this likelihood. Students expressed, in

no uncertain terms, that Obama had little place in the official curriculum (Apple, 2004). Participants recounted, too, experiences that suggested Winston as an inhospitable place for discussing issues related to race and Obama.

The teachers' silence on race and Obama may have been context-specific. While waiting for an interview with a student participant, I spent time with a handful of teachers who were eating lunch in Jonathan's classroom. Unrelated to my own project, the teachers talked about race and their classrooms, specifically venting about the challenge of addressing race issues with their majority-White student population. The three teachers agreed that they curbed some of their curricula regarding the Civil Rights Movement and issues like affirmative action for fear of the backlash they would face from recalcitrant White students. The students' unwillingness to accept the notion of White privilege came up frequently in the conversation, further evidence to the teachers that race was a subject that had to be addressed delicately, if at all, at Winston (research journal, 4/30/14).

The challenge of discussing race in predominantly White school institutions mirrors a long line of research on the subject, including the difficulty in disrupting existing school norms (Lortie, 1975), the reductive, depoliticized, and "watered down" nature of much of what is labeled as multicultural education (DeWaal-Lucas, 2007; DiPardo & Fehn, 2000; Luther, 2009), teachers' self-silencing on race-related issues (Castagno, 2008), and the resistance of White students to critically analyzing issues of race (e.g. Hytten & Warren, 2003). Added to these layers of resistance and avoidance of race-related formal curricula are the well-documented challenges teachers face – both external and self-imposed – to teaching about controversial issues and politically-charged themes (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009; Evans et al., 2009; Hess, 2004). As a polemical figure politically, Obama undoubtedly fits within the category of controversial and potentially caustic subject matter, particularly for teachers at the predominantly

White, affluent setting of Winston High School. One could hypothesize that the racial project of post-racialism (Omi & Winant, 1994) might allow for greater ease of Obama-related discussion at school, free from any potential backlash of discussing race in this (allegedly) post-Black era. The silence on race in schools persisted, however, suggesting either that the subject of race remains taboo in public school spaces or that the topic has lost its importance in the Obama American Era. Both of these stories of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) privilege the dominance of Whites and the silencing of non-White voices by making race more difficult to name and discuss.

And while teachers shied away from explicitly teaching about Barack Obama (and by the same token, Obama and race), the data suggest that students found ways to learn about the president through out-of-school sources: families and community organizations, traditional media and social media. As in the previous finding, the extracurricular learning has precedent within the social studies as well. A number of researchers in the field have found that students' understandings of history, and their own identities within that history, have been significantly informed by families, media, and popular culture (Barton & Levstik, 2009; Schweber, 2006; Seixas, 1993; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). The prevalence of learning through family and community also parallels Epstein (2009) and Levy's (2014) work on history education, wherein students' narratives were a product of both in-school and community-based teachings. As Levy found in her study, students can have strong identification with stories that are uncovered/unexposed in history classrooms, a position that holds true for the students in this study for whom there was no classroom learning of the Obama narrative but a strong desire to understand it.

Critical race theory implores educators and researchers to listen to students' experiential knowledge, counting that knowledge as valid and valuable (Ladson-Billings

& Tate, 2003; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). In this vein, traditional schooling too often discounts the skills and understandings that students of color bring to classrooms from their home communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Yosso, 2005). In this study, students demonstrated a wealth of knowledge on race and Obama, most of which had been intersected with elements of racial and ethnic identities, as well as religious, gender, and sexual identities. Unfortunately, that out-of-school knowledge had little parallel in formal settings, a fact that tacitly communicated to students the lack of institutional importance placed on Obama-related content (Cornbleth, 2002).

Despite the prevalence and importance of out-of-school sources of learning, leaving subject matter such as race and Obama in the hands of extracurricular actors may be problematic as well. Diana Hess (2004), drawing on the work of scholar Amy Gutmann, highlights this point:

As Amy Gutmann writes, “Schools have a much greater capacity than most parents and voluntary associations for teaching children to reason out loud about disagreements that arise in democratic politics” (1999, 58). School’s greater capacity lies in the fact that they contain more ideological diversity than one would expect to find in a family, church, synagogue, mosque or club. This diversity of views makes classrooms powerful places to promote what Gutmann deems the most important component of democratic education: “rational deliberations of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society” (44). (p. 257)

The insight provided by Hess and Gutmann serves as a caution for all concerned with the education of America’s youth, and for students from traditionally underserved backgrounds in particular. I would contend that the narrative of Barack Obama speaks directly to what Gutmann describes as “competing conceptions of the good life and the

good society,” wherein the majoritarian narratives (Delgado, 1989) of “post-racialism” and “racial progress” about students’ lived experiences that may prove otherwise. In the following chapter, I explore this theme of students’ understanding of Obama in the context of U.S. racial progress. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Smith, 2014), social studies and history teachers have a rich opportunity in Barack Obama to promote racial literacy and to allow students a space in which to process, contextualize, flesh out, and “reason out loud” (Hess, 2004, p. 257) about Obama and his racial import. Here, too, is an opportunity to heed the call for culturally responsive teaching (e.g. Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that builds from the cultural and experiential knowledge of students en route to a richer, more nuanced, more relevant curriculum.

It is through the combination of in-school and out-of-school learning that students have the greatest chance of making sense of the world around them and how their various identity markers fit within that world. As Levy (2014) noted in her study of history learning, “The combination of heritage knowledge and school/official knowledge provided a dynamic view of the past that enabled students to grapple with conflicting perspectives and deepened both their understanding of and their identification with these seminal events” (p. 25). As the data presented in this chapter highlight, students in this study have done their part in remaining open to the opportunities for Obama-related learning available to them through the equivalent of “heritage sources”: family, community, and media. Now, educators must contribute to this educative process on Obama, filling in gaps, helping students critically examine the information they have received, and ultimately building toward a more profound understanding of the 44th president and of their own place within the Obama American Era.

As I discuss in the following chapter, the school could, and should, become a place for students to make sense of the competing narratives of Obama they inherit –

from media, from families and from communities – and to understand how these majoritarian narratives and counternarratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) act as pieces in the (re)formation of race (Omi & Winant, 1994) in the 21st century. As schools begin to tackle Barack Obama as a curricular subject, however, teachers must allow for nuanced understandings of Obama and resist the process of flattening his narrative. To espouse a one-sided majoritarian Obama narrative, such as Obama-as-hero, would be to provide the same treatment that so many other African American historical figures have undergone through their inscription into state standards and textbooks (Vasquez Heilig, Brown & Brown, 2012). The students in this study have themselves gained a hybridized portrait of Obama characterized by complexity, and teachers should fight against pressures to condense his story into a simplistic tale of post-racialism, heroism, role modeling, or other narratives of reduction, convenience, or adherence to the racial status quo.

CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING MEANING IN OBAMA

“Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, *the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world*, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it”

(Freire, 2005, p. 130, italics added).

I open this chapter with the same quote from Paulo Freire, though in this case I draw upon the critical scholar’s words for a different purpose. In Chapter Four, I took up Freire’s admonition that educators understand what students know and “how they know it,” applying this concept to my inquiry into how students have come to learn about Barack Obama, both through in-school and extracurricular sources. In Chapter Five, I follow two other aspects of Freire’s insightful writing, including “what happens in the world of the children with whom they work.” In this way, I address the first part of my original research question: *How do students make sense of Barack Obama as a racial and political figure?* Through this line of inquiry, I sought to understand the meaning of Barack Obama for my participants: what significance they placed on his election and the claims of racial progress that accompanied that event. In this way, I hoped to gain insight into the world of these young people.

The other part of the quote above that guides this work is the notion of understanding “the language with which [students] skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world.” In keeping with Freire’s promotion of the idea that educators learn about students’ struggles and strengths, I precede the sections on students’ sense-making of Obama by discussing their experiences in the racialized context of Winston High School. Their stories of race and racial marginalization seemed germane to how they ultimately understood Obama as a racial and political figure. Also,

including this aspect of students' experience – how race was lived on a daily basis – reflects a part of their stories they themselves felt were powerful and relevant and maintains a commitment to promoting the experiential knowledge of my participants (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

After exploring how the students experienced race in their school lives, I use that information as a springboard into recounting the participants' related, though notably divergent, beliefs in the possibility of racial progress and a post-racial America. I then share a central finding on how the students see Obama, a section I have titled, "The cool Black dude." Finally, I conclude by bringing together these sub-themes of racialized school lives, divergent post-racial beliefs, and the "cool Black dude" construct, then incorporating notions of heroism and hip-hop culture as analytic tools for understanding how students made meaning of the 44th president.

Racialized School Context

While the core of my inquiry centered on students' understanding of race and Barack Obama, much of their storytelling began with their experiences in high school. In this way, each of the participants spoke to the highly racialized nature of their school environment, with racial difference and feelings of exclusion significantly shading the ways in which they conceptualized a host of personal and political issues. Tellingly, the students frequently used "us vs. them" language to describe the social and academic divisions at the school between people of color like themselves and their wealthier White peers. The feelings of racial marginalization, both subtle and overt, fell broadly into two categories of experience: those relating to or initiated by students and those instances of marginalization that involved teachers and formal academic environments.

Instances of racial marginalization: Students. Ella recalled her first experiences at the school as being defined by feelings of outsider-ness:

When I first came here, I was a little bit embarrassed, just because, where I live, my background really at all didn't match up with theirs, and so I was so afraid if they found that that's how I was living, they would not necessarily shun me, but they would stereotype me and make jokes about me. (Ella, personal communication, 2/18/14)

Ella's initial impression of Winston High School left her with a sense of inferiority, implying that her peers would see her as different and deficient based on her racial, socioeconomic, and cultural background. Ella's fear of having jokes made at her expense also demonstrates a very real threat for image-conscious high school students, a threat made more charged by the overall Whiteness of the institution.

Yareli made numerous references, both offhandedly during class and more directly during our interviews, to not understanding the world of her White classmates. And as was the case with Ella's comment above, these notions of racial difference also intersected with socioeconomic disparities between she and her White peers. In just one instance, Yareli talked at length about the Jewels, a Winston High School dance troupe made up of predominantly White, affluent female students. She discussed how clearly separate the Jewels were, highlighting their Starbucks cups, expensive clothes and high level of physical fitness, finally concluding, "They're up there, and we're down here" (Yareli, personal communication, 3/6/14). For Yareli, the Jewels symbolized a host of differences – racial/ethnic as well as social and socioeconomic – between she and this majority White, wealthy faction of the school. Elsewhere, as part of a written reflection on her experiences at Winston, Yareli wrote the following:

Coming from a family with a low economic status and who isn't able to have all the nice things most of the kids at [Winston] have made me feel like my self-worth meant nothing compared to the White kids I'd share the halls with. I never

considered myself being smart nor capable of going to college. (Yareli, written communication, 2/11/14)

Yareli continued on to say that her AVID experience helped dissolve much of the negativity she felt about herself vis-à-vis racial and socioeconomic differences at Winston. Nonetheless, issues of racial/ethnic positioning and identity had clearly saturated her impression of her school experience. Perhaps with a level of clarity brought on by being a senior, Yareli recognized the ways in which her sense of self were intimately tied up in the (mis)conceptions about her held by her White peers.

Adam, the half-Palestinian student who self-identified as a minority (his term), pointed out what became a common refrain among the conversations with participants: the heightened sense of racial otherness in advanced and AP courses.

In my IB History class, it's me, you [points at another student], and that's about the only minority you can see. Like that's about it. It's actually quite sad if you think about it: one of us in each corner. (Adam, personal communication, 3/28/14)

Here, Adam seems to place significance on the fact that he and the other student of color in the room are relegated to the corners, a literal example of being placed on the margins in this predominantly White setting. Adam also noted that he “essentially was Mexican,” due to his friendship group and associations, despite having physical characteristics that might allow him to “pass” as White. For Adam, transitioning from his majority non-White middle school to Winston was itself a jarring process, socially and academically, a process he described as “your world being turned upside down essentially, of being at the top and then being thrown down to the bottom.” The jarring image of “being thrown down to the bottom” underscores the essentially traumatic nature of feeling racially, socioeconomically, academically, and socially deficient upon entering high school.

The students' acute awareness of racial difference naturally precipitated emotional stress and strain. Time and again, students recalled ethnic and racial marginalization through feeling disrespected when working on assignments in mixed-race groups, recognizing the challenge of having parents with language barriers to school, or noting the inherent advantages White students held by having college-graduate parents. Yareli, for instance, discussed the academic hurdle of having parents who could not help her navigate the college admissions process.

I know they wish they could help, but they just don't know how to, you know? They don't have that knowledge or education for it. And then there are some people that – I remember in one of my classes, we had to do this essay, and there were these people that were like, “Yeah, my parents are like, fixing my essay.” And I'm just like [laughs], are you kidding me? It's like their parents were doing the essay for them. And I'm just like, I had to do this all on my own 'cause my parents don't. (Yareli, personal communication, 2/20/14)

Yareli later followed up this story by describing the intense pressure to perform she felt due to her minority status, saying, “It was kinda awkward, and I felt like if I screwed up just a little, it would look bad, like on all of us.” These experiences of feeling like a representative for one's entire race or cultural group, as well as the challenges of navigating college admissions without an at-home guide, mirror the racial pressures of minority students in diverse and/or predominantly White school settings discussed by a number of scholars (Diamond, 2006; Lewis, 2003; Tatum, 2003).

Ronald, the African American male participant, was less forthright about experiencing racial marginalization at Winston, or at least more reticent to call out the disparity as a racial issue. In one interview, for instance, he described Winston by saying, “I guess it's a good school. No trouble” (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14).

However, as was the case with the disconnect between Ronald's professed political apathy and the reality of his Obama-related knowledge, discussed in Chapter Four, further conversations suggested a more nuanced racial experience for him. At one point, Ronald shared with me an essay he had written in which he discussed his struggle with racial stereotyping at the school, noting how his light skin provoked peers to question his actual racial background. He wrote, too, about how he felt resentful of the stereotypes attached to Black males, as he himself did not fit within these parameters (research journal, 2/20/14). Elsewhere, in a class assignment provided by Jonathan, Ronald wrote the following:

Race has never really been like a huge obstacle for me as it was for my grandparents and all that. ... It is definitely kind of a discouragement for a minority to show up to an IB class. ... But in general, being a minority at [Winston] probably means automatically at first glance your [sic] not a 3.0 student or something in that manner, or "the whole you don't act black thing, or "you're not a true Mexican" and things like that sometimes are said. Not every minority has to automatically assume their race's negative stereotype persona to be accepted. (Ronald, written communication, 2/11/14)

Here again, Ronald dismisses the salience of race in his own schooling experiences, only to note his feeling of outsider-ness in predominantly White classrooms, as well as the pressure he feels to navigate socially-constructed definitions of racial identities. Ronald's dismissiveness of race, followed by an articulation of a highly-racialized experience, may speak to the silencing power of race and Whiteness (Castagno, 2008:), the ability for race to make and re-make itself in social contexts. Ronald's overt experiences with race do not seem to him to be valued experiences or even a negative reflection of Winston's unfriendly racial climate. This contradiction may underscore how challenging it can be to

name race and racism in the context of “racial projects” like meritocracy and colorblindness (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Instances of racial marginalization: Teachers. While most of their race-based stories revolved around environments with peers, participants also recounted experiences with teachers that contributed to their feelings of racial marginalization. In one case, a teacher responded to a White student’s outright racist comment to Yareli and a friend by saying, “Guys, calm down,” but failing to further address the racist remark (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/2014). Adam noted at one point how the school’s recently published list of exceptional “Who’s Who” seniors did not contain a single minority student, as had also been the case with the Senior Prom Court. Even Ana, who generally resisted using racial labels to name oppression (preferring to point out White students’ academic advantages and privileges), nonetheless recounted stories of feeling othered. She recalled,

I would hate how [pause] me and Yareli would assume that we had a teacher who would always get us like mixed up, or whatever ‘cause we were the only two Latinas in that class. So, she would mix up our names and all of our stuff. And we’d always be like, ah, it’s just ‘cause we’re Mexican, dude. That’s why she does it. (Ana, personal communication, 8/2/14)

In this story, Ana recounts the microaggression (Sue et al., 2009) of anonymity and racial homogenization by a teacher, akin to the name-related transgressions that Kohli and Solórzano (2012) described as “subtle daily insults that, as a form of racism, support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority” (p. 441). Interestingly, the experience forced Ana to express a feeling of solidarity with her friend Yareli, as she noted that “it’s ‘cause we’re Mexican,” despite the fact that Ana was herself proudly of Guatemalan parents. Like Adam, Ana’s ethnic identity became flattened under a heading

of “not-White” in the context of this majority-White school environment, a fact that both Ana and Adam seemed attuned to as a function of being people of color in a predominantly White environment.

Along these lines of racial othering at the hands (or mouths) of teachers, students also recounted stories, both personal and from their peer groups, of receiving “level change” forms from teachers, a less-than-subtle suggestion that the students should drop down from their honors or AP course to the “on-level” course. Students at Winston did not need teacher permission to take advanced courses, but receiving a level change form conveyed a powerful message to the students about the teachers’ expectations for their success in the advanced course. Adam recalled a more extreme experience of receiving such a level change form in which the teacher added a direct message: “She said, yeah, ‘You’re not going to amount to anything ... if you keep acting like this, keep talking.’ I mean, it was the first day of school and we were freshmen!” (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14). Beyond the stresses inherent to the social divisions within the student body, the participants had clearly experienced racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009) in interactions with school faculty as well. Undoubtedly, each of the participants demonstrated myriad ways in which their school lives were influenced, and even determined, by their racial minority status in this majority-White school.

Hope and the Post-Racial

Despite a schooling experience so clearly saturated by notions of racial difference for all five participants, the students generally demonstrated more complex, even ambivalent, beliefs about the plausibility of a post-racial present in the U.S. In other words, the students did not necessarily contend that the racial divisions of their predominantly White high school would characterize the world beyond the school walls.

Conflicted beliefs in the post-racial. Adam, the student who had been told that he and the other non-White student in the class “wouldn’t amount to anything,” nonetheless expressed conflicted beliefs about race in the U.S. more broadly. When asked about how Barack Obama’s election might affect racial equity in America, Adam explained his position:

Adam: It shouldn’t be that we stop caring. It’s just you should realize, look at how far we’ve come. You know, this is great. And sort of the ill feelings towards people, I mean, toward other groups has decreased, but there’s still gonna be racism. I mean, the sooner you realize that the better. I mean, if we’re a society that can realize there is gonna be problems and there will be discrimination within groups, I mean, the better ...

Interviewer: Do you feel like you’ve had to deal with that in your own life?

Adam: Um, not so much. I mean, I went to [a middle school] where it was a primarily, you know, minorities school, so I didn’t really get much discrimination there. Here, I mean, it’s clearly separated, but there’s not discrimination. (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14)

In this conversation, Adam suggested that racism is a permanent fixture of American life, and no changing of the racial-political guard would alter that dynamic. He noted, too, that Americans (to whom he refers using the possessive “we”) should celebrate their racial progress and “look how far we’ve come.” Thus, in the same train of thought, Adam affirmed the need to recognize racial progress and also expressed a more cynical belief about the permanence of racism and racial divisions in the U.S. He also claimed not to have faced discrimination in the final sentence of this comment, a

sentiment that stands at odds with previous parts of Adam's story in which he recounted numerous instances of racial marginalization.

Ella similarly spoke in somewhat contradictory terms about the plausibility of a post-racial turn in the Obama American Era. She noted,

As far as this post-racial issue goes, um I think it's wonderful, obviously that we're able to – after like what, 200 years? – get, um, a Black president. But I don't necessarily think that now we're just the fairest country of them all. Because there's still the issue of, he grew up in a totally different environment than most African Americans because traditionally African Americans live in poor environments and get a poor education and don't have the opportunity to go to college and have the necessary tools that they need to become something like that. And so, I don't agree with the whole, if you haven't made it, that's on you. Like, some of that, of course, some of that is you, but then at the same time, everybody's dealt a different, um, different cards. (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

In this reflection, Ella displayed thoughtful analysis, attuned to the nuances of Obama's biography and noting the critique that the president did not have the typical African American experience and therefore could not fully herald substantial change in the lives of that community. She critiques, too, the notion of meritocracy, a key feature in constructing the myth of post-racialism and colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011).

Later in that conversation, Ella articulated a common critique of the post-racial narrative, namely that a decrease in instances of overt racism gives the public a false sense of the diminishing power of race. She said,

Since there's no obvious, obvious like, you can't sit here 'cause you're this color, you can't sit here because you're *this* color.' Um, since there's none of that really going on, a lot of people feel like we've resolved the issue and nothing's wrong and so nothing's being done. (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

Ella's insight on how people may assume "we've resolved the issue" mirrors the misleading token of progress argument made by numerous race scholars reflecting on the significance of Obama's election and the more subtle, colorblind racism of the post-Civil-Rights Era (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Carter, 2009; West, 2008).

Despite the skepticism of post-racialism that Adam and Ella expressed, both also offered somewhat contradictory statements about Obama's significance as a racial figure. I read Adam the quote from Barack Obama noted in Chapter One – regarding the possibility of inspiring young people with his election – and I asked Adam if he agreed with that sentiment. He said, "I mean, yes, because I know he didn't come from a very rich or prosperous background. ... He came from a place where he wasn't expected to, you know, get far in life, and he's sort of using that whole African American, anybody can really do it" (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14). Ella similarly noted the social significance of Obama's election, referring to "the fact that we did vote for a Black president means that we were kind of pushing forward" as a nation (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14). Interestingly, Adam and Ella displayed differing understandings of Obama's background, with one highlighting the president's atypical, privileged African American experience and the other noting his lack of resources as further evidence of national progress.

Post-racial optimism. Unlike Adam and Ella, Ana expressed a perspective more solidly rooted in the optimism of a post-racial present. The following exchange exemplifies Ana's take on Obama's significance for the nation's racial climate:

Interviewer: Ok, so, another way for me to say that might be: how important is it to you as a citizen, do you think, that we have a president who is not White? Or does it not change things at all?

Ana: It does. I think it definitely does. Because [pause] It's like, it goes back to what I meant, what I said about being in a classroom with White people. Like, it doesn't matter, like, who it is that's around you. Like, if you put yourself out there and you wanna like really learn and be, like, really smart or whatever, and you try your best, then you can get there. So [pause] like him, with him being there, it doesn't really surprise me entirely because I know, I was just thinking, finally, like there's someone who's not White that's the president. It just, it just also, I think it's gonna help a lot of other people think that it's possible, like anything is possible, like, I don't know, believe in stuff or whatever.

Interviewer: Why is that? Or how would it help people think that?

Ana: So they wouldn't just be saying, on, only White people are smart, or oh, I can't do that because it's only for White people, or whatever. So now it's like you can come up with a comeback, like saying, oh, then why do we have a Black president? So yeah.
(Ana, personal communication, 8/2/14)

Unlike Adam and Ella, Ana's perspective appeared more rooted in the meritocratic promise of the Obama American Era (powell, 2011). Interestingly, Ana's beliefs that Obama's election has significantly improved the prospects for people of color may actually derive from the harsh feelings of marginalization she experienced in her

high school. Whereas in that setting she felt that others perceived her as less capable than her White classmates, she saw Obama's election as a potential "comeback" for people like herself hoping for greater opportunity in the world beyond her public school. Yareli seemed to share some of these hopes as well. In a conversation with Ana, Yareli and myself, they noted,

Ana: Yeah. [My parents] know, as long as he's – oh, he's Black, so now people have more respect towards, like, us, you know, brown-looking people. ... Yeah, and it makes them realize, oh, we're up there now 'cause it's always like White people against everybody else.

Interviewer: Is that true for your family?

Yareli: I think being viewed as minorities progressing towards a bigger representation. ... Like, being viewed as more of an important figure now. (Ana & Yareli, personal communication, 8/2/14)

Personal inspiration. And while the students differed somewhat in their beliefs about racial progress in the U.S. on a structural level, all spoke about Obama and his presidency as personally inspiring. Ana, for instance, talked about the symbolic uplift for communities of color, saying,

I think having a Black president helps the Hispanic and Black community to have ... bigger aspirations to do things. ... So, like, they're gonna think, ok, if he was able to achieve being president then I can achieve being a lawyer or something.

(Ana, personal communication, 8/2/14)

Yareli echoed Ana's sentiment, with Adam similarly concluding, "I mean, it's huge, just the sort of symbol that he's become" (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14).

And despite her aforementioned skepticism of racial progress on a more national-global scale, none of the participants expressed greater individual inspiration from Obama's election than Ella. Ella's pride in having a Black president, and the significance of that event on her own life, was evident in many of our conversations during the year. I quote her at length here, to capture some of those feelings.

The only time I ever saw a Black person excel was when it was in like football. ... And so to see a Black man running to rule over a nation, I thought that was really inspiring for me because [pause] for the first time in my life, I felt like I actually could be whatever it was I wanted to be without any strings attached. ... And so I guess the fact that seeing that he could become president made me feel like maybe I could run for the governor or something. Or maybe something small, like the mayor or something. (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

When speaking about the importance of having a Black president here, Ella immediately personalized the event, drawing civic and professional inspiration from the achievements of Barack Obama. In this way, Ella expressed a sentiment that parallels what the African American participants in Conchas et al.'s (2014) study noted, that an individual achievement (Barack Obama's election) held a collective benefit for the entire Black community in the U.S.

At one point I asked Ella to talk to me about the Barack Obama t-shirt I had seen her wearing in class one day. She said,

And so to me, the shirt is sort of symbolic of change in America. So, that's why I have the shirt in the first place. And I wore it – I don't remember what was the – there was something going on that prompted me to wear the shirt, but I can't remember off the top of my head what it was. But I had the shirt on, and I was

very proud to have that shirt on and I got a lot of compliments that day. And so, I was really happy. (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

In actuality, the first response that Ella gave when I asked about her Barack Obama t-shirt was, “Which one?” It turned out that she owned six. These shirts – including the one I had seen with Obama’s image in red rhinestones – allowed Ella to publicly display her pride in having a Black president. She implied, too, that having conversations with others about the shirts was part of the appeal of wearing them. Thus, despite Ella’s measured beliefs in racial progress in the U.S., and even her skepticism of President Obama himself (recall her recognition that he did not have the typical African American experience), she nonetheless felt a deep sense of satisfaction in the achievements of this man.

As mentioned previously, the students’ beliefs on the significance of Obama and the plausibility of a post-racial America fell along a spectrum; it is difficult to draw a single conclusion across these varied perspectives. For students like Ana and Yareli, their views on race in a national-global sense seem, in some ways, to reflect Powell’s (2011) description of politically-liberal post-racialism, in which the nation has progressed beyond the divisiveness of race in favor of the promise of equal opportunity. Ana’s hopefulness parallels the findings from Kaiser et al.’s study (2009), which found that college-aged participants’ beliefs in racial progress increased after Obama’s election and beliefs in the need for increased attention to race in America decreased at the same time.

However, each of the participants expressed some measure of inspiration in Obama’s story, with varying levels of belief in how the president’s achievements would relate to their own lives. Adam, for instance, simply commented on how symbolically important the 2008 election was, while Ana and Ella each noted specific ways in which they, or members of their communities, would hold higher professional aspirations as a result of Obama’s presidency. In this way, the students did relate to Obama’s own

prediction that on the day he took the oath of office, “There are millions of kids around this country who don’t believe that it would ever be possible for them to be president of the United States. And for them, the world would change on that day” (Heilemann & Halperin, 2010, p. 72). The students’ expressions of personal and community uplift due to the 2008 election, and the inherent thawing of race relations that would allow for such opportunities, stand at odds with the previously discussed feelings of racism and marginalization in schools. As I discuss in greater detail in subsequent sections, the participants generally accepted these facts not as irreconcilable contradictions but simply as indicative of the complexity of race in the U.S. in the Obama American Era.

The Cool Black Dude

Students’ ambivalence about the promise of a post-racial American future did not, however, temper their overall feelings about Barack Obama himself. While some, like Adam and Ella, separated the hopefulness of racial progress from the plausible reality of substantive racial change, all of the participants nonetheless expressed sentiments that reflected a significant level of respect for, and even admiration of, the 44th president as an individual. These expressions of respect manifest themselves as appreciation for particular Obama qualities – namely his “normalcy” as a politician – as well as a level of defensiveness against Obama critics. The resulting sub-theme, then, speaks to a view of Obama rooted in personal admiration and aspiration (Aymer, 2010), if not whole-hearted belief in the associated narratives that accompanied his election.

The participants all spoke about Obama in terms that separated him from past presidents based on his demeanor and public disposition. For instance, the students generally concurred with the legitimacy of a claim made by an *Ebony* magazine cover that I showed them, an image that featured Obama stepping from a black limousine under the subtitle, “The 25 coolest brothers of all time.” As Ronald commented, “I guess, if

he's cool, he's cool. If he's cool enough to make the list" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). Irrespective of the magazine cover, Ella described her own observations of Obama's character, "And the way he carried himself, he was very calm. So he was just real cool, so he was like, cool Black dude" (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/13). Ella's characterization of Obama as a "cool Black dude," echoed by the other participants, gives name to this sub-theme in part as a representation of how these young people visualized the president. Obama's coolness, in this sense, reflects an image of the president as calm, poised, and in control, a feature of his appeal to the hip-hop community (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

Obama's coolness also reflected participants' impression of the president's popularity. In contrast to how they conceptualized previous presidents, the students noted that Obama exhibited a humanness and connectedness to everyday people. Ronald, for example, described Obama as "pretty causal. ... Sayin' he's not too good to be like a normal person" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). Much of the commentary on Obama's coolness, his approachability, came through our discussion of the various images that I showed the participants. In the interviews, after showing the students each of the Obama-related photos, drawings, and magazine covers individually, I asked them to look back through the visuals and choose the one that best represented their personal, overarching image of President Obama. Interestingly, all five selected the same photograph as the one most representative of *their* Obama: an image taken during his 2008 campaign of then-candidate Obama playing in a scrimmage with the University of North Carolina men's basketball team. Assuming that students would choose any number of other, more *presidential*-looking images, or at least offer some diversity in their opinions, I was quite surprised by the consensus choice.

The students offered similar explanations for why they selected this photo of a dressed-down, apparently candid shot as most representative of their Obama image. In short, this photo seemed to show President Obama at his most real, his most approachable. As Yareli noted, “I feel like even though he’s president, he still does ordinary things that ordinary people do ... so seeing him play basketball ... he doesn’t seem much different from us” (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14). For Adam, the photo displayed the least amount of political or media spin, a concept he described as being “un-leaned-toward.” “I mean, this maybe might be the most un-lean-toward photo because that’s what he does, that’s what he enjoys to do: play basketball. ... Sort of, you caught him in a time when he’s doing something that he likes” (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14).

Whether students saw the Obama-basketball photo as significant because of its apparent lack of spin or due to its portrayal of approachability, the general impression across all of the comments generally followed the conclusion drawn by Yareli: “He doesn’t seem that different from us” (Yareli, personal communication, 4/2/14). Ella summed up this impression more substantially:

I don’t know, just because, as the president, you, you kind of have to have this, I’m in charge, I’m serious all the time kind of demeanor about you, and that’s how most presidents are usually depicted, except when they have, you know, those cute little black-and-white family photos with the dog or whatever. But it’s just, I don’t know, I like seeing photos of President Obama when he’s playing basketball or going roller skating because it’s like, everybody kind of forgets, like he’s still normal. He’s just a normal guy, and he just plays basketball. He’s really cool, and apparently he’s really good. He’s got mad hops. That’s awesome. (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14)

For the students, having a president who exudes normalcy allowed them to connect more strongly to Obama than to other political figures. In other words, the notion of a “cool Black dude” as president facilitated the students in symbolically bridging the gap between their own lives and a political office from which they would otherwise feel disconnected. Obama’s coolness, then, served as a tool for bringing students closer to this political leader and, perhaps, what he represents sociologically. They connected to the story of Obama as inspiring and, possibly, as a role model, precisely because of his coolness. By offering another racial-political identity, a hybridized identity including elements of cool, Black, and presidential, students can relate to him both as an individual and as a representative of a new form of racialization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Protecting the cool Black dude. Considering the fact that the students felt a connection to President Obama through his *coolness*, it is perhaps unsurprising to note, too, the frequency with which they defended him against perceived threats. Part of students’ Obama-related knowledge was a general sense that Obama had been, and continued to be, the target of a wide range of challenges and critiques. In some cases, students discussed the ways in which politicians or the general public hurled false accusations at Obama. Adam, for instance, recalled seeing images of the president online that insinuated unflattering comparisons. “I’ve seen one where they dress him up in like a Nazi uniform and you see him, oh, he’s a Nazi. Stuff like that. Like, they really dress him up in different things” (Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14). Later, Adam noted other ways that he perceived threats against the president. “Yeah. It’s the sort of thing where Obama, some people – I shouldn’t say some people – but some politicians they [inaudible word] a terrorist or, oh he’s a socialist. Things like that.”

And Adam was not alone in noticing the pervasiveness of the critiques against Obama in public discourse. Ronald, for instance, questioned why political opposition

fostered such antipathy towards Obama, asking, “Like, what would Mitt Romney have done different than he’s doing? Like, I just want to know why there’s so much hate? I know about the healthcare thing, but that’s all I know about” (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14). Here, in typical Ronald fashion, he downplayed his own political knowledge while simultaneously pointing out an insightful trend in American politics, namely, the arguably unparalleled level of political ire directed at President Obama.

Another instance where students discussed the overt critique of Obama occurred in a conversation with Ella during class one day. As mentioned previously, Ella found an artist’s image of Obama that depicted the president as a Christ-like figure: a crown of thorns on his head and arms spread as though nailed to a cross. In discussing the significance of the image, Ella thought that the artist might be appropriate in comparing Obama to Jesus. She said that she saw the image as representative of the harsh treatment that President Obama received from people who disagreed with him and, like Jesus, he was trying the best he could to help people. Ella recalled how the people who commented on the image on the website seemed to misunderstand the meaning of the drawing, assuming the artist intended to glorify the president by comparing him to Christ. In an insightful rebuttal to those interpretations she added, “All of his wrong moves are crucified because he is African American. ... He’s not God” (Ella, personal communication, 5/9/14). For Ella, this image critiquing the critics spoke powerfully to her own understanding of Obama’s presidency, enough so that she proceeded to carry the image around with her on her Kindle device so as to engage others – her mother, a teacher, me – in conversations about its significance.

Students’ awareness and sensitivity to the pervasiveness of critiques against Obama, whom Ronald referred to as “definitely the most famous and scrutinized out of

most of them” (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14) are in fact fairly consistent with what a number of scholars and pundits have observed about this presidency (Parks and Rachlinsky, 2009). As legal scholar Geoffrey Stone (2014) wrote in the *Huffington Post*,

But no president in our nation's history has ever been castigated, condemned, mocked, insulted, derided, and degraded on a scale even close to the constantly ugly attacks on President Obama. From the day he assumed office – indeed, even before he assumed office – he was subjected to unprecedented insults in often the most hateful terms. (para 3)

Ronald’s characterization of Obama as both *famous* and *scrutinized* parallels what others have noticed in the anti-Obama sentiments, the racist undertones to protests, and the anti-Muslim rhetoric from the political right (Adjei & Gill, 2013). Historian Greg Grandin (2014) noted in a *New York Times* column,

I’ve been struck by the persistence of fears, which began even before his election, that Mr. Obama isn’t what he seems: that instead of being a faithful public servant he is carrying out a leftist plot hatched decades ago to destroy America; or if not that, then he is a secret Muslim intent on supplanting the Constitution with Islamic law; or a Kenyan-born anti-colonialist out to avenge his native Africa. No other American president has had to face, before even taking office, an opposition convinced of not just his political but his existential illegitimacy. (para 9-10)

Adam picked up on the racist sub-text to accusations about Obama’s religious background. He recalled a conversation with his father,

And, funny, my dad, whenever he was voted into office, my dad said, oh, whenever you see the signs when he was getting voted in, oh, “Obama-Biden,” he’s like, “Does anyone else notice that it sounds like Osama Bin Laden? Does

anyone notice this?” And my dad was joking, he was like, “Let’s see how long it takes before people start calling him a terrorist.” I’m like, “Ah, well, pretty soon.”

(Adam, personal communication, 4/17/14)

Adam and the other participants, despite being quite young at the time of the 2008 election, picked up what Grandin (2014) terms the questioning of his “existential legitimacy” (para 10), in this case through the discourse of Muslim accusations and the implied pejorative nature of such an implication. As Ortiz (2008) argued, the unstated global a war on Islam should obviate a discussion of post-racialism in the Obama American Era.

As a final coda to this sub-theme of protecting the cool Black dude, the students’ protectiveness of Obama also extended to more subtle forms of threat: the insinuation that he had gained election due exclusively, or primarily, to his Blackness. Ella recalled a story along these lines,

I was in middle school, and really kind of huge issues because it was the, um, the Democratic primaries where it was Obama versus Hillary. And so, I had gotten a lot of crap because I was, wanted to like go for Obama, and a lot of people would go, are you only going for him because he’s Black? And it would make me mad when some of the girls would say it because that’s the equivalence to me saying why are you voting for Hillary? Because she’s a girl?” (Ella, personal communication, 2/28/14)

In this situation, Ella felt defensive of the implication that she might use race as her sole grounds for voting, that to do so would be inherently wrong or dismissible, and even, perhaps, that President Obama ultimately won because of the Black vote. Here, again, we see a strong personal connection to the man (Obama) and the idea (African American achievement) and then a desire to protect these images from critique.

Perhaps with his characteristic skepticism of the political process, Ronald also noted that he had heard such accusations that Obama had won the presidency because of his race, a suggestion he himself thought may in fact be true. As Womack, Bridgeforth and Beasley (2015) describe, such a feeling was fairly common among African Americans after the 2008 election, though the argument that Obama won expressly due to his race offers an overly-simplistic and possibly misleading explanation of election demographics. Either way, the influence of race on Obama's electability and actual election are ideal topics for exploring in social studies curriculum, a theme I have discussed in Chapter Four and elsewhere (Smith, 2014).

Making Meaning in Obama: Discussion

In a 2008 article for *New York* magazine, controversial linguist and political commentator John McWhorter offered up his take on the potential racial significance of the nation electing its first Black president. In the article, entitled, "ObamaKids: And the 10-year-olds shall lead us," McWhorter posits, essentially, that for young people who grow up with a Black man in the White House, cultural attitudes towards race will inevitably shift based on the very normalness of this African American achievement. He writes,

For the members of a black generation that grew up watching a black man step out of Air Force One, the idea that they live under the yoke of white supremacy would require more cognitive dissonance than most people are willing to tolerate. ... In 2008, a black man of that very age group may well be on his way to becoming president, and no one quite knows what to make of it. But the Obama Generation will wonder what all the fuss was about. (McWhorter, 2008, para. 5)

A national move toward racial progress, McWhorter suggests, is the inevitable product of a re-conceptualized "normal" in the U.S. vis-à-vis Obama's election.

The students in this study – who were themselves not much older than 10 at the time of Obama’s election – presented a more nuanced assessment of Barack Obama’s significance than the one offered by McWhorter in 2008. Rather, the participants voiced more measured hope in the possibility of racial progress after Obama. And while they did in fact find personal inspiration in Obama’s success, these hopeful feelings were tempered by the marginalizing material realities of their racial minority status in a majority-White high school. In short, these “ObamaKids” found hope in the first Black president, just not the kind of hope that erases an awareness of sociocultural factors that similarly shape their lives. In making sense of the findings in this chapter, I introduce below two narrative tropes – Obama as the hip-hop president and Obama as a national hero – to place the students’ responses into broader sociopolitical and theoretical contexts. As I will try to demonstrate in the following sections, the majoritarian narratives (Delgado, 1989) of “hope,” and post-racialism offered by both media outlets and the Obama campaign in 2008, fails to fully account for students’ own complex, hybridized narratives of the president.

The cool Black dude: America’s first hip-hop president. Perhaps the most starkly clear finding here came in how the students conceptualized the president as an individual, an image I have termed the “cool Black dude” portrait of Obama. For the students, Obama’s calm demeanor, his indulgence in seemingly “normal” hobbies like basketball (and possible other unnamed factors such as Obama’s relative youth) all contributed to the impression that Barack Obama is, in fact, America’s most approachable, most relatable commander in chief⁵. Portraying Obama as the “cool Black

⁵ Not all observers interpret Obama’s “cool” persona as a positive attribute. Bonilla-Silva (2009), as one illustration, argues that Whites saw Obama’s approachability as indicative of his unwillingness to change the racial status quo. He refers to Obama as “the ‘cool’ exceptional black man not likely to rock the American racial boat” (p. 1076).

dude” may parallel what several scholars have noted in characterizing Obama as a hip-hop president (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Gosa, 2010). Through his careful analysis of rap music during the 2008 election, Gosa (2010) contends that the hip-hop community adopted Obama as it’s presidential symbol through a range of tactical and rhetorical maneuvers, from capitalizing on the campaign theme of “hope” to attract Black voters, to legitimizing Obama’s Blackness and maleness (counter to Hillary Clinton); from holding up Obama as the symbol of racial progress (though not post-racialism) to detaching the hip-hop identity from its previous gangster associations.

Additionally, Alim and Smitherman (2012) note the ways in which references to the hip-hop president in public discourse reflect both those who wish to “celebrate Obama’s relative youth, hipness, and comfort and familiarity with Hip Hop Culture,” as well as others who used the term derisively, attempting to link him to a supposed violent “ghetto” culture. Finally, Schneider’s (2012) examination of the Obama campaign’s visual imagery (such as campaign posters) having roots in urban graffiti art adds one more dimension to the (carefully cultivated and controlled) hip-hopness surrounding the Obama image. The participants themselves made several references to the president’s hip-hop identity as well, such as Ella’s mentioning of an online Obama reelection image that borrowed the imagery of rap artist 2 Chainz.

When considered through a hip-hop lens, Obama’s “coolness” takes on much greater significance for issues of curriculum, student achievement and the academic identities of students of color. A number of scholars have previously discussed the ways in which hip-hop can serve as a bridge to other forms of literacy, as well as to social studies concepts (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Stovall, 2006). Emdin and Lee (2012) have similarly taken up the notion of the hip-hop president, arguing that pedagogical opportunities exist for focusing on Obama’s hybridized identity, one that

includes a hip-hopness, as well as the Obama Effect, in breaking down some of the prevalent self-images of underachievement held by low-income students of color. Writing about the use of the hip-hop-Obama image in secondary science contexts, Emdin and Lee argue,

Since hip-hop youth are forced to enact role identities because of the societal non-acceptance of their hip-hop culture, they believe that the President also undergoes this process. Therefore, they see past his role identity as President and envision his hip-hopness as a part of his core identity when he is outside of the public eye. ... Not sacrificing one's hip-hopness for the sake of school or academic success is part of the notion of realness that the Obama effect exemplifies. As hip-hop youth see Obama's hip-hopness as a genuine piece of his identity, they regard him as expressing a certain realness that they have an affinity for and develop an emotional connection to. Therefore, they generate these same types of connections to subject matter that is presented through a connection to a phenomenon that is rooted in hip-hop. (pp. 21-22)

Emdin and Lee connect Obama's hip-hopness to the complexity of his identity, noting how students sense an underlying "realness" in the president's character. Omi and Lee (2009) have similarly argued that Obama's set of experiences and cultural markers make him relatable to many Asian American communities, further evidence of the ways in which elements of Obama's hybridized identity facilitate connection-making to diverse groups. The students in my case study similarly detected and appreciated Obama's realness, or what they more often termed his *normalness*. Emdin and Lee's final point – that the hip-hop identity could be used to foster a stronger connection among students to academic content – parallels calls made elsewhere for direct teaching of Barack Obama (Smith, 2014). However, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, the lack of attention paid to

issues of race, controversy, and contemporary politics inside the school walls makes such a recommendation more theoretical than practicable at this point.

The cool Black dude: American hero. Beyond just the hip-hop community, wide swaths of the American public saw Obama's 2008 election as a moment tinged with heroic undertones. Be it the improbability of the election itself or the promise of progress that the achievement prompted, particularly with regard to race, Obama's election and early presidency took on something of a hero's narrative: the lone actor capable of wide-ranging social uplift. As Vaughn and Mercieca (2014) wrote, "What is clear is that as a central feature of the nation's political discourse about the presidency, Obama could not ignore the nation's heroic expectations" (p. 257). The nation's willingness to grant Obama hero status (or least the roughly 50% of the nation who supported his presidency) follows a long public proclivity for hero-making and mythologizing individuals in the face of adversity (Loewen, 2007; Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). In President Obama's case, the long history of racial prejudice and exclusion in the U.S. en route to the White House served as the perfect enemy in this political hero narrative.

And as has often been the case with heroified American leaders, school texts came to reproduce, and possibly even contribute to, these national metanarratives of heroism. May, Holbrook, and Meyers' (2010) study of elementary-aged informational texts found portrayals of Barack Obama consistent with hero narratives. Some of the texts they reviewed held Obama up as a lone-hero figure while others gave credit to Obama's collaboration with social and political groups. Obama's heroic potential, however, remained relatively consistent across the narratives. In a similar textual analysis, Nel (2010) discussed the ways in which children's literature on Obama, some of which went as far as to suggest Christ-like comparisons, contributes to notions of post-racialism and the mythologizing of the president. Taking a critical analysis of these portrayals, Nel

notes that the books “also participate in what we might call Obamafiction, or the fantasy that Obama’s success portends the success of others and that his ascendance symbolizes a renewal of America’s moral purpose” (Nel, 2010, p. 349).

In both of these studies, the authors imply that young learners receive the impression that Obama’s mere existence as the first Black president suggests a heroic level of importance and inevitable national progress. The production of comic books featuring Barack Obama as a *superhero* figure (Weiner & Barba, 2012; Yanes, 2012) lends further credence to the popular image that surrounded the first Black president and the collective hopes for his presidency. The pervasiveness of such representations of Obama may give name to the familiarity and personal connection that the participants felt with this president; his ambiguity as a public figure extends beyond the political into the cultural and entertainment spheres. The Obama-as-hero narrative, too, captures a small part of the students’ understanding of this president, though the expectations of heroism remained tempered.

Critics of Obama’s racial persona have noted the ways in which he has held himself up as evidence of racial progress in the U.S., as he did each time he invoked the unlikelihood of his own success during his campaign speeches (Nel, 2010). Scholars have argued that Obama’s election campaign either avoided race as much as possible (Hill, 2009; Metzler, 2008) or used rhetoric that promoted unity and overcoming differences over direct pronouncements on racial inequity in the U.S. (Kennedy, 2011). Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011) place a significant measure of blame for the notion of post-racialism at Obama’s own feet. Citing various campaign speeches and policy measures, they suggest that Obama’s failure to center issues of race and racism creates the space for the post-racial narrative.

He advocates “universal” (class-based) policies in lieu of race-based social policy. ... He talks about inequality and discrimination but always mentions the need for blacks to be personally accountable. Consequently, Obama’s blackness is becoming whites’ new weapon of choice for singing their color-blind lullaby. (p. 202)

These authors argue that the heroism inherent in Obama’s presidential ascendance, coupled with the myriad examples of privileging national unity over race-consciousness, creates a narrative around the president that offers empty hope in the possibility of real racial progress.

The findings presented in this chapter occupy the space between these two narrative camps: Obama-as-hero on the one side and Obama-as-false hope on the other. The participants definitely expressed a belief that Obama’s presidency portends greater opportunity and greater access for people of color in the U.S. The participants recounted majoritarian narratives of racial progress, of the inspirational power of seeing a Black leader, and of the potential ripple effect for all non-White Americans: if he could achieve, so could we. This optimism parallels the findings from Conchas et al.’s (2014) study of African American males’ views on race in an Obama American Era. According to their study, “The commentary drawn from these students indicates that Obama’s presidency was more than just an individual achievement; it was also about honoring the triumphs of all the important figures in African American history” (p. 11). Much like the students in my study, Conchas et al. found that participants held a greater sense of equal opportunity for people of color in the U.S. in the Obama American Era. In keeping with the hero narrative, Obama’s individual achievement paves the way for a better life for all.

My findings also support this earlier study in that the participants expressed hope in racial progress while simultaneously critiquing the persistence of racism in their own

lives, in my case seen through the racially unfriendly space of Winston High School. The juxtaposition of these findings, impressions of racial progress on the one hand and a continued racist material reality on the other, may speak to the complexity and ambiguity with which young people of color view the U.S. racial landscape in the wake of the election of the first Black president. In other words, students offered a hybrid story of Obama, one that draws on both majoritarian stories of racial progress and on counternarratives (Delgado, 1989) of continued racial discrimination in the U.S. This hybridity of identity also connects to the notion of Obama's hip-hopness, an identity that, as Emdin and Lee (2012) note, is built on both "realness" and fluid and dynamic expressions of self.

Despite the optimism expressed by students in my study, some of them provided responses and shared stories that conveyed a more concerned racial outlook. For all students, including Ana and Yareli, that concern came in the form of feeling racially marginalized in school and in internalizing the low expectations and self-doubt that often characterize the experiences of students of color in predominantly White, affluent high schools. And for students like Adam and Ella, racism was a more permanent fixture in American life. No single actor, be it a president or otherwise, could counteract the deeply entrenched divisions of race in the U.S.; the notion of post-racial America, for these students, was more a hopeful fantasy than realistic expectation. While the students in the Conchas et al. (2014) study were more unequivocal in their beliefs about how Obama's election would ultimately benefit them, they too failed to recognize the inherent contradictions between their optimism in Obama and the harsh racial realities of their in-school lives. As these authors note, "The finding that African American students perceive a more egalitarian opportunity structure brings up questions as to how this sense of 'no excuses' interacts with the reality of the multiple forms of marginality that students

actually face in their daily lives” (p. 20). While the students in my study stopped short of proclaiming an era of meritocracy and “no excuses” for people of color, they too felt comfortable with the coexistence of a racially-unfriendly current reality (school) and a more hopeful, more egalitarian future reality in the Obama American Era.

The cool Black dude: Complex and ambiguous. In considering the significance of Barack Obama to students of color, the picture is ultimately somewhat muddier than that offered by McWhorter’s ObamaKids. Responding to various examples and counter-examples of Obama’s racial significance, Vaughn and Mercieca (2014) concluded,

Reading these analyses together enables us to learn precisely how complicated it has been for President Obama to satisfy the nation’s heroic expectations: his natural demeanor, political investments, personal history, motivating narratives, and his race combined to make Obama an ambiguously heroic leader. (p. 262)

The notion of Obama as “ambiguously heroic” seems to hem more closely to the findings that arose from the data presented here. Students saw in Obama a somewhat heroic figure that may not signal significant change for race in the U.S. but undoubtedly stands as an example of how positive change may be separately under way. I have elsewhere referred to this same heroic ambiguity as part of the broader notion of Obama’s hybridized identity, a concept I explore more fully in the following chapter.

And while some of Obama’s statements and actions may have fueled the majoritarian hero narrative, particularly during his 2008 campaign, more recent rhetoric from the president may suggest a greater sense of the complexity of the office and the ambiguity inherent to constructing one’s public identity. The following is an excerpt from *New Yorker* editor (and Obama biographer) David Remnick’s (2014) conversation with the president:

“I have strengths and I have weaknesses, like every president, like every person. ... I do think one of my strengths is temperament. I am comfortable with complexity. ... The President of the United States cannot remake our society, and that’s probably a good thing.” He paused yet again, always self-editing. “Not ‘probably,’” he said. “It’s definitely a good thing.” (p. 35)

Despite the hopes or fears of politicians and pundits (depending on one’s political leanings) that Obama’s election could indeed remake an entire national landscape, the students in my study did not harbor such grand visions for the 44th president. Rather, they seemed comfortable with Obama’s own measured statement of his personal limitations in addressing the complexity that is race in America. Instead, they offered a hybrid story, one of hope and skepticism, inspiration and continued inequity, majoritarian and counternarrative. I take up this hybrid perspective in greater detail in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing Conclusions and Revising Paradigms

After the historic 2008 election, legal scholar John A. Powell reflected on the significance of Barack Obama's election in the context of a post-racial, colorblind milieu. He drew the following conclusion:

The process of racialization has changed and is changing. We continue to have some old-style explicit racists, but their numbers are declining. Even though we talk about white and non-white attitudes, there are a range of attitudes and conditions reflected in each racialized group. What may be more interesting is that most of us carry conflicting racial attitudes within ourselves. ... There are more possibilities than the Jim Crow racial practices of the 1950s and 60s, the colorblind position, or postracialism. We are in a space where our old way of thinking about race does not serve us well and can easily lead us to misunderstand the opportunities and challenges that are before us. (Powell, 2009, p. 801)

Powell asserts that in this Obama American Era, the nation must take a more nuanced look at race, at racism, and at the process of racializing identities. Overt or clearly-defined expressions of racism, and even of race itself, have been largely replaced by a more complex matrix: the re-worked forms of racial power and the messy, seemingly contradictory racial attitudes individuals hold about themselves and others. To borrow the colloquialism, this is not your parents' racial America.

Powell's analysis of the changing racial landscape in the U.S. mirrors a number of the findings presented in this study. Coming of age in the so-called post-racial era, these high school students of color expressed notions of racialization that do not fit neatly into traditional modes of thinking, like blatant racial discrimination and active protest and

resistance, but there were moments that did harken back to those themes. And yet the promises of colorblindness, meritocracy and the post-racial turn post-2008 did not hold true as well, though here too we saw glimmers of hope in racial progress and the belief in a collective uplift for communities of color in Obama's America.

Rather, the student participants were a study in contrasts. All five recounted the myriad forms of racism and racialization that took place in their predominantly White urban-suburban high school. Ella's fear of ridicule for her home life, Yareli's pressure to represent her community in unfriendly advanced courses, and even Ronald's struggle to define himself outside the bounds of a Black male stereotype – each student recounted the multiple and varied ways in which race and ethnicity served as a mechanism for division, and at times oppression, in their daily lives.

While race was so present in the routine interactions between the students and their peers, and between students and teachers, race as a concept remained relatively absent from the official discourse of classroom learning. The students recalled no instances of learning about, discussing, questioning, or exploring how Barack Obama's historic 2008 election may have shifted the national conversation on race. Ronald's conclusion that, "It's all just old politics or Texas history" (Ronald, personal communication, 4/30/14) gives name to the nature of social studies learning at Winston High School: traditional historical narratives, far removed from the lives of contemporary students and perhaps even further removed from the contentious, politicized, even risky (Evans et al., 2000) debates on race in America in the 21st century. To recall bell hooks' caution, "Simply talking about race, white supremacy, and racism can lead one to be typecast, excluded, placed lower on the food chain in the existing white-supremacist system ..." (p. 27). In this predominantly White, affluent school space, teachers avoided

those subjects they perceived as overly provocative, such as race and Obama, fearing pushback from White students and their agentic parents (research journal, 4/30/14).

And yet, despite the familiar themes of racial minority students in predominantly White schools (Lewis, 2003) and the racelessness of social studies curricula (Howard, 2003), the students displayed connections to Barack Obama as a racial/political figure in ways that defied commonsense understandings. They expressed measured and ambivalent optimism in the plausibility of a post-racial turn in the U.S. but nonetheless felt that the president's achievement signaled greater opportunity for people of color in professional and civic environments. Ella, Ronald, and Adam all professed skepticism in the abolition of racism and the declining salience of race, though each of these students noted ways in which they personally felt connected to Obama, inspired by his story and what that story might mean for their own life chances.

The participants defied, too, the raceless, Obama-less formal school curriculum, the body of literature on the civic disengagement of young people of color in the U.S. (Fridkin et al., 2006) and even their teacher Jonathan's belief that "They're not a political crowd, yet" (Jonathan, personal communication, 5/11/14). By seeking out Obama-related content in online forums – Facebook and article comments sections – and community spaces like churches and barbershops, the students' engagement with this political figure simply looked non-traditional. While beyond the bounds of official curricular practices (Apple, 2004), these students' Obama learning reflected high levels of independence and agency, as well as a connection to the kinds of out-of-school learning that often take place in cultures and communities outside the racial and ethnic majority (Epstein, 2009; Seixas, 1993)

Racial formation and a changed racial paradigm. The messiness of the students' relationship to race, with its inherent contradictions and restrained

commitments, makes increasing sense in the context of Omi and Winant's (1994) theory of how race is formed over time. This process necessarily involves the making and remaking of racial boundaries and definitions, inclusions and exclusions. Omi and Winant offer the theoretical tool of the *racial project* as a means to parse how race is understood in a particular historical moment. Taking up this thread, I would offer the post-racial narrative as a contemporary racial project that sheds light on both how race is perceived in America today and how young people of color, such as those in this study, may make sense of what Omi and Winant call the dynamic of racial structures and racial representation.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Omi and Winant (1994) describe a racial project as both an "interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to organize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (p. 56). The post-racial turn neatly fits within this definition of a racial project. As a representation of racial dynamics, post-racialism furthers efforts towards race neutrality by neoliberals (Goldberg, 2009) and even a new wave of Black politicians (Marable, 2009). This particular moment in American history has been used to conflate the hopes for racial equity with the pretense that such equality has now been achieved (Adjei & Gil, 2013). As an effort to "redistribute resources," post-racialism embodies the notion of a racial project of the 21st century in its ties to meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and the pushing of material racial inequalities further behind the discursive veil (Haney-López, 2010; Ortiz, 2008). The post-racial project, then, facilitates a host of new, problematic racial frames, such as former New Yorker Mayor and presidential hopeful Rudy Giuliani's recent accusation that Barack Obama does not love America (Samuelsohn, 2015). The post-racial project allows for Giuliani to justify comments like, "He doesn't love you. And he doesn't love me. He wasn't brought up the way you were brought up" (para. 3) as

ostensibly race neutral, despite the nation's long history of equating Americanness with White (Mills, 1997).

To reintroduce a tenet of critical race theory, the structure of racial realism and racial idealism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) offers a similar analytic tool as the racial project. Racial realism speaks to the material and lived realities of racism, while idealism covers the symbolic realm of mis(representation) and portrayal. The participants in this study inserted themselves into these structures, these racial projects, in messy and ill-defined ways. On the one hand, they tended to espouse the persistence of racism in a *realistic* sense, as they described the experiences of marginalization and inhospitality offered by their predominantly White high school. Some, like Ella, challenged the plausibility of substantive change in the U.S. on a material level, rejecting meritocratic claims for example. However, all of the participants saw the nation's racial idealism progressing in the form of Barack Obama, a personal inspiration and a figure needing protection from the ubiquitous political critics. Here, too, the students may have tacitly recognized the material challenges of being a Black president, including camouflaged threats like Giuliani's, while still maintaining that Obama's existence in the White House signifies a rethinking of their own racialized opportunities and aspirations.

To recall once more then-candidate Obama's supposition that "the world would change" for millions of young people on the day of his inauguration, the accuracy of such a statement is debatable in the context of this study. The material world changed little for these young people, and even their understandings of the racial landscape in the U.S. remained cautiously optimistic. But President Obama did indeed inaugurate hope for the students as individuals, perhaps the best of all possible scenarios for critical educators and researchers like myself. As Powell (2009) noted in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, to ignore the complexities of this new racial project, the ill-defined racial

moment, is to “misunderstand the opportunities and challenges that are before us” (p. 801). While the power of post-racialism may in fact make race and racism more difficult to name in the Obama American Era (Goldberg, 2009), we cannot miss the genuine opportunities – symbolic, curricular, and pedagogical – that exist for young people of color coming of age in this new reality. That opportunity begins, I would argue, with recognizing the hybridized narratives of Barack Obama that young people of color in the U.S. may hold. We need not consider students as entirely taken by the majoritarian narratives of Obama-as-hero, Obama-as-role-model or Obama-as-Great-Unifier.

However, their stories of Obama’s racial America did not fit neatly into a counternarrative either, as the students offered hope in racial progress and, in some cases, the belief that the election of an African American to the White House would have widespread benefits for people of color in the U.S. In this situation, then, we must extend beyond the narrative-counternarrative binary and allow for an amalgamation of stories, replete with contradicting perspectives. In short, when provided a space for storytelling about race, schooling, and the meaning of Barack Obama, the students provided narratives that suggest a new, complex form of racialization. As I discuss in the section below, it is in this complexity that educators and researchers may find their own hope, as young people of color define for themselves their prevailing Obama narrative, resisting the formation of a racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994) of post-racialism that fails to reflect their lived realities and racial ideals.

Implications

The findings from the research presented here offer a number of important lessons for educators and researchers concerned with the experiences of young people and the role of social studies pedagogy and curriculum in defining those experiences. As I did in organizing the significance of the study in Chapter Two, I have separated my discussion

of the study's implications into the same three categories: the citizen, the curriculum, and the student

The citizen. As the Rudy Giuliani anecdote highlights, Barack Obama's presidency has created new understandings of race and citizenship, with oppressive voices seeking new discourses for policing the boundaries of what is American. Continuing a long history of inclusion and exclusion of citizenship with regard to race (Brown & Urrieta, 2010; Gotanda, 1991), the new racial project of post-racialism permits racist rhetoric to take on a new slant, couched in the critiques and challenges to citizenship. Current debates over immigration in the U.S. demonstrate this principal as well. Students of color in the U.S. have typically held different views on citizenship and political engagement than their White counterparts (Callahan & Obenchain, 2012; Cornbleth, 2002; Fridkin et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Educators and researchers have a responsibility, then, to help young people make sense of these varied commitments in the context of the first Black president.

Each of my participants displayed tensions in their identities as citizens. The emphasis on the racial othering and marginalization in school suggests a continued struggle for belonging, or what Rosaldo (1994) might call "second-class" citizenship status. In various ways, each of the students' told stories of split identities, with ties to multiple cultures and multiple visions of America (e.g. El Haj, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the students' racial/ethnic backgrounds and continued marginalization in school lead to notions of citizenship that include participation in family structures, community organizations, and religious groups (Barton & Levstik, 2004). However, these experiences, coupled with some mild beliefs in the post-racial promise, suggest a group of students for whom definitions of citizenship are as much characterized by tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities as by a single understanding of civic identity. Adam's

attention to the Islamophobia surrounding the election, Yareli's questions of his citizenship status, and Ella's conflicting messages on Obama, race, and sexuality from her church – each of these themes suggests a process of delicate negotiation (Ong, 1996), a more fluid or flexible conception of citizenship (Mitchell & Parker, 2008). As Perez (cited in Seif, 2008) found, undocumented immigrants to the U.S. can feel simultaneously marginalized by American society and remain civically engaged in their communities, a finding that applies to Ana's specific case here but also to the less-than-straightforward civic identities presented by all of the participants' stories.

For social studies educators charged with helping students navigate the official bounds of citizenship, the election of Barack Obama stands as a crucial political moment for analysis. Students must be engaged in conversation about the changing civic and political landscape, from voting demographics (Womack et al., 2015) to political aspirations. As Rosaldo notes, citizenship in the U.S. follows “a dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (p. 738). In the context of the 21st-century post-racial project, students must be guided towards seeing, and even critiquing, the ways in which society positions them as citizens within an existing (though often hard to detect) power structure.

The curriculum. Barton and Levstik (2009), Epstein (2010) and Seixas (1993) have all demonstrated that students learn history as part of a cultural community, with out-of-school narratives existing alongside, and even in contrast to, the content that students learn as part of the official school curriculum. As Levy (2014) notes, "Students connect to and understand the past in myriad ways, and ways of understanding are often – but not always – mediated by their identification with people who experienced past events" (p. 25). The mediation of history learning through students' identification with others parallels some of the findings from this study. The students' Obama-related

content knowledge very much intersected with the experiences of family and community members: Adam's Palestinian father, Ella's grandmother and her church minister, and Ronald's barbershop to name just a few. Each of these figures played a powerful role in providing Obama-related content to the participants and in placing meaning on those pieces of information.

However, these findings about students' out-of-school Obama-related learning presented two challenges. First, the extracurricular learning process led to an incomplete corpus of knowledge about race and Obama; the details picked up here and there, coupled with the prevalence of misinformation available, created a piecemeal understanding of the relevant events. For example, as a result of some students being unaware of President Obama's biracialism, what Carter (2009) called his "two-ness," a central part of Obama as a symbolic and pedagogical opportunity gets lost. The other challenge came in how the students internalized and made sense of the information they did receive. When Ronald read hateful comments about the president on the Barack Obama Facebook page or when Ella listened to a sermon denouncing the president for his stance on gay marriage, the students experienced tensions and conflicts of identity. How were they to understand these attacks in a broader context of race and identity politics? This challenge mirrors a finding from Howard's (2004) study of racial dialogue in which secondary students had the desire to discuss race in the context of daily life but lacked the formal guidance to do so safely and productively. These two challenges – incomplete Obama knowledge and identity-challenging learning – meant that students were left without guidance in navigating the fraught, messy, occasionally threatening landscape of learning about Barack Obama.

Unlike the work presented by Epstein and others, wherein students' had to balance in-school learning of history with their extra-curricular narratives, the students in

my study had no formal narrative from school with which to contextualize their prior knowledge. To this end, educators should consider more direct teaching of race and Obama as a social studies curricular subject (Smith, 2014; Tyson & Park, 2008) as means to interrogate the racial-political significance of the 44th president and the realities of the post-racial promise. Using Obama's complex biography and the current U.S. racial climate, social studies educators could help students in balancing the majoritarian narratives (Delgado, 1989) of Obama with a more critical look at notions of meritocracy, colorblindness, and other 21st century racial realities. I do not advocate the creation of parallel narratives of President Obama: a formal in-school curriculum and a divergent, home/community-based story. Rather, teachers could begin with students' prior knowledge on the subject and use the classroom space to help them flesh out, contextualize, extend, explore, and even challenge the varied, but important, threads of learning from community-, family-, and media-based sources. However, to lose the curricular opportunity that Barack Obama presents would be to eschew a chance for rethinking issues of race, citizenship and Americanness in the context of the social studies.

The student. One of the central takeaways from this project was the personal connection that students felt towards President Obama. Their enthusiasm for Obama's election as symbolically inspirational affirms the positive role modeling that some scholars have suggested may result from his election (Aymer, 2010) and that he himself implied with his statement included at the opening to Chapter One. In most cases, too, the participants suggested more community-wide uplift as a result of Obama's presidency, such as higher professional aspirations for people from traditionally marginalized populations. However, as stated in the section above, a wide chasm existed between what

students heard, found, and internalized about Barack Obama's story outside of school and the near void of Obama-related discussion within the school walls.

By ignoring Obama's narrative and the inherent benefits to students therein, schools forego a range of personal, political and academic benefits for young people of color. As Emdin and Lee (2012) found, teachers can facilitate student gains in science achievement and efficacy by connecting the content to Obama's hip-hop identity. Other researchers have shown that the "Obama Effect" has real, measurable value in countering the stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) that young people of color face in schools and society (Marx et al., 2009). Schools have the opportunity to harness the hero-like status and broad popular culture appeal of the 44th president as a tool for inspiration and positive identity formation. I think back to Ronald, writing about the ways in which he felt unsure of how to locate himself at Winston High School considering he did not fit neatly into others' stereotypic conceptions of Black men. Barack Obama's own hybridized, well-considered, negotiated identity could serve a student like Ronald, if not directly as a model, then as a permission of sorts for considering complex visions of one's own possibilities.

Finally, for educators, researchers, and others concerned with the experiences of young people of color, the students in this study have troubled any simplistic characterizations of the Obama generation. Unlike the "Obamakids" discussed by McWhorter (2008), the students here offered a more nuanced portrait of racial politics and youth. There were stories of inspiration in, and even adoration of, Barack Obama, but those sentiments were often juxtaposed with skepticism of racial progress and even expressions of personal marginalization in school. For the students, there was no inherent contradiction to these perspectives: inspired by and adoring of Obama on the one hand and skeptical of systemic racial progress on the other. Rather than try to characterize the

students within a particular label, critical race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1999) would likely argue for allowing for ambiguity and contradictions, as those are inherent to the students' complex stories at this moment in their lives. As Powell stated in the quote that opens this chapter, "There are more possibilities than the Jim Crow racial practices of the 1950s and 60s, the colorblind position, or postracialism" (p.801). We must allow for new racial identities and commitments that do not fit neatly into commonsense understandings of race relations. Again, students rejected simplistic majoritarian narratives about Obama's importance (hero, role model, post-racial figure) in favor of more complex, hybridized stories of race and racialization.

If the project I have described here can claim any success, it would be in providing a safe space for young people of color to speak on issues, both personal and external, and to vocalize their racialized experiences and perspectives. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) contend, "When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. ... They become empowered participants, hearing their stories and the stories of others" (p. 27). A researcher from outside the community need not be the one to create spaces for racial storytelling (Bell, 2010), or narratives that speak against oppression. In fact, these moments of counterstorytelling (Delgado, 1989) would likely have been far more profound for the students had they been initiated by those in power within their school. It is hard to fathom the possible benefits that students of all backgrounds would incur if regular opportunities existed for honest dialogue and narrative on how raced is lived, both in school and beyond in Obama's America.

Limitations, Complications, and Next Steps

The study I have conducted in pursuit of these questions about race, students of color, and Barack Obama, and the subsequent themes from the research presented here,

are undoubtedly limited in a variety of ways. From the scope of the inquiry to my own positionality as a White adult male, the findings from this research must be placed in the context of several mitigating factors.

Limitations. In terms of collection of the data, the study could have benefitted from a broader inquiry into each student's life, possibly including interviews with family members and other teachers, as well as observing the students in a variety of school environments beyond the specific bounds of this case: a single AVID classroom. Had the students' limited time not been a factor, I would have included a reflective journal component for each participant to keep throughout the year. The journal could have served as one additional space for the students to reflect on experiences in school, record mentionings of Barack Obama, and generally try to make sense of some of the bigger questions of the study (such as the possibility of U.S. racial progress) outside of the higher-pressure environment of a formal interview.

The number and type of participants may have limited the study as well. I chose to focus specifically on students of color and, in this case, to keep the number of participants to a total that would allow for the greatest depth of inquiry into their individual narratives. Adding participants to the mix may have allowed for different kinds of participant stories and perspectives to arise and/or for greater saturation of the findings presented here. Also, the cohort of students with whom I worked fit a particular niche: low-income students of color with an expressed commitment to become the first in their families to attend college. My findings may have differed had I worked with students in some of the majority-low-income high schools in the city, selected participants without an expressed desire to attend college, or sought out youth from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, my study does not explore how

these themes are considered or experienced by elementary-aged children, which again narrows the scope of the findings I can present here.

When describing the project to various people, both within the education research community and outside of it, I often received the same question: why not have White students in the study as well? The question is a fair one, I think, and one that I considered prior to beginning the work. Ultimately, I decided to maintain a commitment to sharing the experiences of students of color, as those voices are so often absent from traditional social science research (Delgado Bernal, 2002). I ultimately wanted to investigate the claims made by Barack Obama, and others, that his election would essentially change the belief structures, including hopes and aspirations, for millions of young people. As White youth have not traditionally suffered from aspirational barriers to political and professional achievement, I felt that my efforts would best be focused on students of color. Finally, as Delgado (1989) wrote on the subject of counterstorytelling, it serves both a constructive function in its ability to illuminate existing realities and a destructive purpose, in which new possibilities are offered. By working with students of color, then, I saw an opportunity for counterstorytelling, and as a result, the narratives recounted by participants did in fact reveal both existing realities and new possibilities for how race is lived in America.

Complications. As I discussed at length in Chapter Three, I recognized that a significant underlying factor to the entirety of this research project would be the racial difference between my participants and myself. There were indeed times in which I felt this distance quite acutely. In one case, Ana asked me where in the city I lived. When I told her the part of town, she mentioned that she assumed that I lived alone and in a large house (research journal, 8/4/14). I can only conclude that Ana's assumption that I had the resources necessary to own a home (a fact I personally found laughable after 5 years of

living on a graduate student stipend), stemmed from the perceived differences between us. When Ana saw me, she saw a relatively professional-looking adult White male, an image she associated with money and a particular lifestyle. Moments like these reminded me of the gulf between my participants and myself, as well as the many points of departure between us that extended beyond race, including differences of socioeconomic status, religion, sexuality and age, that further complicated these relationships.

There were numerous times throughout the year, however, in which I felt like I may have taken on a particular role for students in which my outsider status became an asset. Periodically I found myself acting as a sounding board for students to share opinions on issues of race, schooling, social groups, etc. that they may not have shared with peers, teachers, or family members for fear of judgment or the breaking of discursive taboos, as seemed to be the case in discussing race at Winston. As two stark examples with Ella, she felt comfortable discussing her bisexuality with me – a fact she had shared with very few people – and the contentious relationship between that identity marker and her racial and religious backgrounds (Ella, personal communication, 4/16/14). Later, Ella brought into school a series of photos of the Obama family that she had found online with the expressed purpose of showing me the images. The conversation that followed, in which Ella shared her opinions on the portrayal of African American women in the media, her affection for the Obamas as a family unit, and the importance of seeing a female, Michelle Obama, with Ella's own skin tone in such a place of prominence as the White House. These kinds of moments allowed me to feel that the research process was, at least at times, mutually beneficial and dialogic (Erlandson et al., 1993), an opportunity for students to use their storytelling for the purpose of what Delgado (1989) calls “psychic self-preservation” (p. 238). My prolonged engagement in the research site (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and friendliness with an adored teacher

(Jonathan) likely helped ingratiate me to the students, some of whom may have been subconsciously seeking a space to openly discuss topics of race and racialization.

One conclusion I can draw from these different types of researcher-participant scenarios – researcher as racial outsider, researcher as socioeconomic/sexual/religious/age-based outsider, and researcher as trusted listener – is that these relationships were ultimately fluid. While race undoubtedly placed a considerable role in all aspects of the research process, as I detail further below, the ways in which racial differences affected my interactions with participants shifted from moment to moment, intersecting with other identity markers and at times creating an opening for safe dialogue. This conclusion parallels Narayan’s (1993) call for reconsidering a binary insider-outsider researcher identity in favor of the recognition of the dynamic nature of these relationships. Also, as Young (2004) found in his sociological research, a lack of racial matching can even have benefits for the research, particularly when participants provide more detailed explanations to their cultural-outsider interviewers, including pieces of the story they may otherwise assume need not be stated with culturally-similar researchers. I observed this phenomenon in my work, too, as students took time to explain their backgrounds to me, from how Latino families discuss Obamacare to the politics of the Black church and barbershop.

Positioning myself in the research. A number of scholars within the critical and postmodern research traditions have made calls for in-depth analyses of how positionality influences all aspects of the research process (Cary, 2006; Chikkatur & Jones-Walker, 2013). Chikkatur and Jones-Walker (2013) argue that researchers must move beyond “merely list[ing] various social identities that might have influenced the research process” (p. 832) and towards a more robust process of self-questioning how perspectives and biases color what and how they learn from participants. Cary (2006) takes the case

further, suggesting that questions of positionality must ultimately become conversations on epistemology, that one cannot exist without the other. She writes,

We must definitely situate race, gender and other ways of knowing in qualitative research – we just need to do it in a more complicated and sophisticated manner – to avoid the convenient escape from responsibility regarding the embedded nature of privilege and the colonizing oppressive tendencies of research. (p. 54)

Instead of these “convenient escapes,” Cary suggests that researchers must employ an “analytical frame that reveal[s] the embedded knowing that framed the project” (p. 55).

In a sense, Cary calls for researchers not just to acknowledge their various identities but also to question those kinds of assumptions that are embedded throughout the process. My commitment to centering race issues, for instance, was my commitment, and with that disposition I likely presumed that my students would similarly interpret their world through a racial lens. For some participants, like Ella and Adam, race did appear to provide an important heuristic for making sense of experiences. In other cases, like with Ana, race remained under the surface and other (related) lenses, such as language and citizenship, influenced her thinking more powerfully. My decision to “see” race in this project likely closed me off to particular ways of reading, analyzing, and knowing the participants’ stories. Ronald’s noticing the harshness of critiques against Obama could have potentially been interpreted as an expression of masculinity, for example, but my race-based assumptions blinded me to those opportunities.

Setting aside for the moment the other identities that likely influenced how I shaped this project, my own race, and my Whiteness in particular, likely created spaces for both opportunity and failure. Lensmire et al.’s (2013) critique of a White privilege-based pedagogy also holds true for the White-positionality-convenient-escape approach to research methods: “The ritual of confession of white privilege...creates a space

without room for much analysis or understanding” (p. 421). Here, too, a mere listing of one’s positionality, only to dismiss and forget it, ultimately closes the door on substantive analysis. As a researcher, my identity in this project is not easy to unpack or analyze. Undoubtedly, my Whiteness (and likely maleness) provided me with certain privileges, such as the privilege of authority as a researcher and of access to this school site and these students. But to simply confess such privileges does not, as the authors quoted above caution, absolve me of further considering my Whiteness; these advantages are conferred upon me whether I acknowledge them or not. My race and gender and other social markers place me within a particular power dynamic, and acknowledging that dynamic is only one small part of attempting to disrupt it. The ways in which I approached this research, practically and theoretically, may have fostered additional steps towards mitigating the unequal power inherent to my social location and the fundamental assumptions behind the research endeavor.

As I outlined in Chapter Three, my hope for this research project was to create something of a hybrid critical paradigm, which I described as a theoretical and methodological approach that relied on the tenets of critical race theory but drew in elements of other progressive, critical and postmodern traditions as well. Specifically, I sought to balance a belief in the primacy of experiential knowledge with an ethic of care (Noddings, 1986), humanity (Dunbar et al., 2002) and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). In this way, I have sought to maintain fidelity to the stories of my participants, preserving as much of their voices as possible in the excerpts included here and involving them in the meaning-making process of these narratives as much as time allowed. I included those narratives on students’ racialized experiences at Winston High School, despite the fact that the subject fell outside the original scope of the project and failed to directly speak to my research questions. These were a few of the ways in which I

attempted to match my research practice with my espoused commitment to this hybrid critical paradigm.

In reflecting on the entirety of the project, though, I find it difficult to escape the “confessional” exercise. I feel compelled to recognize, for instance, that the research questions on Barack Obama were mine, stemming from my experiences as a teacher in Washington, D.C. and my personal and professional interests in the subject of the post-racial phenomenon. The decisions of inclusion/exclusion of stories and perspectives were mine as well. Ana and I spoke for nearly thirty minutes about her beliefs on the power and responsibility that comes with having full U.S. citizenship. While that discussion revealed much about Ana’s character and the kinds of knowledge that she felt mattered, I ultimately decided that the subject fell outside of the bounds of this project, and so I elected not to include this part of Ana’s story. This exclusion is just one of the ways in which I alone made judgments of interpretation, meaning, importance and relevance. As a result, the reader does not gain access to Ana’s story as she chose to tell it but rather the story that I have created about her through selection, exclusion, and analysis.

Escaping the confessional role of positionality in qualitative research may be impossible, particularly without an agreed-upon road map within the scholarly community for how researchers move beyond the listing of identities and towards a deeper analysis. Even considering the intersection of positionality and epistemology and calling into question those embedded understandings that shaped the project cannot entirely divest me of influencing the work, of shaping the research in my own image, so to speak. As Crotty (1998) wrote, the world only has significance when “meaning-making beings make sense of it” (p. 10). If I cannot escape the researcher-centric nature of this work, as ultimately I must make sense of the data, then perhaps these commitments are more dispositional: how one considers the inquiry, the subjects, and the

knowledge supersede any specific checks and safeguards against colonizing, de-humanizing research. To return to Kincheloe and McLaren's (2002) perspective, critical research brings with it "a nuanced understanding of power's complicity in the constructions people make of the world and their role in it" (p. 94). It is with this nuanced approach and attention to power that I have sought to humanize my participants in this research and recognize (and hopefully minimize) my own imprint on the meanings presented here.

Next Steps. Despite the weight behind my decision to focus this study exclusively on the experiences of students of color, there is great possibility in an investigation into how White students make sense of these same themes of race, Obama, and the potential for significant change in this new American era. Little research exists that attends to these questions in the context of students of color, and the field has produced even less scholarship that centers the inquiry on White students' experiences and attitudes. A handful of recent studies (Devos & Ma, 2013; Kaiser et al., 2009; Plant et al., 2009) sought to measure the effects of Obama's election on diverse groups of college-aged students with regard to issues of implicit racial biases, impressions of Americanness, and beliefs about the status of race relations in the U.S. These studies have opened the door for inquiry into how diverse groups of students, including Whites, conceptualize race and Obama post-2008. However, as was the case with research with students of color, no scholarship addresses these issues qualitatively or allows for robust dialogue with White students on a wide range of narratives about race and Obama. Finally, previous literature in this area has only addressed the beliefs of college-aged students, leaving open the opportunity for research into the potentially very different attitudes of students in P-12 schools.

The project I have described here looked at students' relationships to Obama in an essentially passive manner: exploring the pre-existing understandings, attitudes, and beliefs about race and the 44th president. Another rich area for exploration along this theme would be to follow in the footsteps of several other researchers who have sought to examine racial issues in school contexts (Blum, 2012; Epstein et al., 2011; Stovall, 2006) by examining how students respond to curricula that explicitly center race as a subject of study. As I have argued elsewhere (Smith, 2014) and throughout this work, Barack Obama himself allows for an enormously rich "text" for the careful study of race, from issues of biography and identity to election demographics, racialized policies and politics to the range of Obama archetypes (Civil Rights Hero, Hip-Hop President, Post-Racial Promise). Thus, I would propose that engaging students, from a range of backgrounds and grade levels, in instruction and discussion on some of these narratives would provide both powerful, standards-aligned learning opportunities and the means for inquiry into a multitude of important questions about youth and race, civic engagement, and nature of Americanness in the 21st century.

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