Due to the limited literature available, this qualitative study is somewhat exploratory as it seeks to understand the perspectives of mixed-race college students’ racial identity choices. I relied on a qualitative case study method of conducting interviews and groups sessions for data, and then used qualitative approaches to analyze, interpret, and present the data.

This study is qualitative because of its emphasis on how reality is perceived and experienced by the individual participants. Creswell (1998) defines a qualitative case study as “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in content” (61). The essential component of my research is an attempt to create a space for my participants to dialogue. As the researcher, I then became “the conduit through which such voices can be heard” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 23). Ultimately, my research aims to contribute to emancipation from the generations of silence maintained by those who find no solace in the racial structures perpetuated in US schools.
My research included opportunities for participants to represent their ideas in response formats, such as through conversations. The participants and I met for discussions and interviews in a private conference room on campus. It was important to establish a convenient but private setting to help foster a sense of community among participants and to increase the likelihood that they would feel safe engaging in conversations about being mixed-race, a subject so often foreclosed in schools. The meeting room was intended to be a place where students individually and collaboratively could make sense of the racialized social structures within schools, communities, and society.

One critical aspect of this study was that participants’ words were understood to be shaped by larger political discourses. My role was really more than that of a reporter; I was also a social critic. My beliefs are necessarily situated in a particular worldview and ideology. Creswell (1998) reminds us of the political nature of qualitative research: “Qualitative researchers approach their studies with a certain paradigm or worldview, a basic set of beliefs that guides their assumptions” (74). Furthermore, as Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, “Behind the terms [theory, method, analysis, ontology, epistemology, and methodology] stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective” (18). As such, my lived experiences as a mixed-race educator and qualitative researcher are entrenched in this study. As a researcher, I viewed myself as working out of a critical race paradigm, which I used to affirm or critique participants’ discourse.

As an educator at Cliff View College (the name is a pseudonym), I had access to mixed-race students, so I began seeking among these for participants willing to share their experiences. I opted to use the “snowball” technique as a means of finding mixed-raced interview subjects. Meetings with potential participants took place in November 2008 on the Cliff View campus. During these meetings, I explained the project in detail, answered questions, and distributed to interested students a packet containing a participant consent letter, a demographic questionnaire, and a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope. I plainly described my goals for the project in the consent letters so the participants were informed about the objectives of the study from the beginning. Potential participants were given a week in which to complete and return the forms. (I also provided the participants with a duplicate consent letter to keep for their own records.)
Methodology of Study

After the deadline for returning forms, I processed the consent letters and participant demographic questionnaires received. I used the questionnaires to interpret how well each prospective participant fit the required profile of my study (e.g., all participants must have two or more racial heritages). The participants included individuals whose parents are of two or more socially designated racial backgrounds. The final number of students who fit the profile and agreed to participate was nine.

The participants I selected identified as American Indian or acknowledged American Indian ancestry. They came from various tribal communities. All were students at Cliff View College in New Mexico. Cliff View College was opened in the 1960s with funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The college proclaims that it embodies a bold and innovative approach to education. The unique learning environment of Cliff View College seeks to promote American Indian/Indigenous leadership and an atmosphere that allows students to embrace their cultural heritage. At the time of data collection, the school enrollment was 513 students, representing eighty-three federally recognized tribes and twenty-two state-recognized tribes. In the 2008–2009 academic year, 89 percent of the college’s students were American Indian. The students had the choice of residing on or off campus.

To protect the anonymity of my respondents, a pseudonym is assigned to each. Given the character of qualitative research, learning more about each participant was imperative. I offer below brief portraits of all nine participants. A chart outlining a brief summary of each student is found in appendix C.

Tony

An older student married to his Navajo wife for twenty-four years, Tony has three children (a son and two daughters) and a grandchild. Tony identifies himself as outspoken and a loving father. He was born in Los Angeles and attended Centennial Senior High School. In earlier years of his life, he lived in Chinatown, then Gardenia. His memories of school include being bused to Compton to attend school, where his friends were “pretty much a melting pot.”

Tony has always acknowledged being mixed-race, but his mother urged him to “be a strong black man . . . you are always going to be viewed as a black person because people view your skin before they view everything else.” This molded his self-perception of being raced as black. As Tony says,
“Some people would automatically and readily assume that I’m black. I have no issue with that.”

Stacey

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, Stacey self-identifies as Navajo. She stated that she is proud to say she is Navajo and reared traditionally within her culture. Although she does not speak her Native language fluently, during her childhood she was surrounded by family members speaking Navajo. She has a close relationship with her Navajo mother. And she attended Monument Valley schools, which emphasized culture and tradition. She proclaimed with a passion, “I love crocheting!”

As a mixed-race person who identifies as American Indian, Stacey revealed that she often felt she was not accepted by her father’s family (white/Hispanic) and was ridiculed by her peers at Native-oriented schools for being mixed (German/Mexican). “I’ll introduce myself . . . like, in Navajo, you know . . . say my clans and as soon as, like, people hear, like, German or Mexican . . . they’re like, ‘What?’ You know when they first hear German, they called me a Nazi.” Her willingness to share her American Indian peers’ perceptions of her identity brought up questions about blood quantum and the meaning of Indianness. Regardless of her experiences, Stacey is very proud to acknowledge that she belongs to two clans, her mother’s (Navajo) and then her father’s (Hispanic/white).

Anthony

Anthony has a bubbly personality that shapes his entire outlook on his lived experiences. Anthony identifies as being a “very” fair-skinned Hispanic with a multiracial heritage of Hispanic/American Indian/white. Most of our conversations began with Anthony sharing chocolate and his recent comic art sketches.

Anthony spent most of his childhood in a multicultural setting on a navy base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He did not become curious about his identity until his family relocated to New Mexico. He described the state as not having a “mixture of cultures,” stating it was “more like its own culture.” His father’s admonition to “be proud of your last name; carry it forever” has
had a profound impact on his identity. To lighten the tone of our conversations, Anthony would always add humor. When I asked him what people assumed about his race, he said, “Well, in Hawaii, when I was going to school there, I knew I was Hispanic because my Dad told me to be really proud of it. But whenever I would tell people, they would say, ‘Oh, you’re from Mexico?’ People just don’t understand!”

Although Anthony has a lighter outlook on life, he has had significant experiences of being raced. Once he was judged by his last name when applying for a job; the interviewer reacted to his fair complexion with surprise when they met: “Oh, you’re Anthony.” Anthony concluded, “Am I gonna get graded badly because of my last name? But it’s something that can happen . . . you know?”

Samantha

Fair complected with straight hair, Samantha at first seemed shy and reserved. But very soon she was at ease, rattling off details of her school, family, and schooling experience with little prompting.

She acknowledged that she is half Navajo and half white. Like many students in this study, she discussed her experience of being raced while attending a private school that was predominantly American Indian. “They all saw me as white and treated me like I was white.” Though most of her friends were American Indian and white, Samantha says that her school experience influenced her racial identity. Although she had some negative experiences being mixed race, she does not judge people based on their race.

College has been a significantly different experience for Samantha than for some of the other participants. She feels more accepted and does not think other students view her as being white only when she is with American Indian peers.

Kathy

With a smooth brown complexion and dark eyes that convey a strong sense of self-confidence, Kathy is an older student who was reared by a family from the Southeast that acknowledged only their black heritage. She explained that her family sees identifying with American Indians as taking “away from how they see themselves or who the public sees them as.”
Kathy has a wealth of experience of identifying as a mixed-race American Indian; because of her phenotypic features, she often is made to feel that she has no claim to being American Indian. Because she is not an enrolled member in a state or federally recognized tribe, her Indianness is further questioned by her peers and in her classroom and campus experiences. Kathy expressed a great deal of frustration about how she will be perceived as an artist, especially as an American Indian artist creating traditional art. She remembers being asked, “You’re not all black, are you?” Her experiences have not hindered her passion for Native cultural activities and embracing her heritage through traditional art forms.

Logan

Logan would stand in my doorway, tall and brown, with a confident smile. He could be described as an activist for American Indian people, a student leader, and definitely the devil’s advocate for our conversations about mixed-race experience. Half white and half Creek, he identifies as American Indian. He acknowledged that in his hometown mixed-race people with American Indian heritage variously did and did not identify as American Indian.

Logan stated he never experienced having to prove his status as a mixed-race person who identifies as American Indian. “I was of the opinion that I didn’t have to try to be Native . . . I just was Native.” Because Logan phenotypically fits the mold of “looking” American Indian, his identity was not questioned. This was one of many reasons he could play devil’s advocate, often saying, “Why can’t you just be Native and not worry about how people view you?” However, he did acknowledge that there are issues with “skin color,” which can often be a factor in whether or not others perceive you as being American Indian.

Kim

Kim identifies as Alutiq, but has a mixed-race background of Alaska Native and white. As an Alaska Native, Kim has a great appreciation for the environment and its significant impact on the culture of her people. Discussing mixed-race identity, Kim noted that her sister is Alaska Native/black/white and there are no issues of race in her family. Her smiles were unquestionably
full of excitement when she shared personal stories about salmon fishing with her boyfriend or snowboarding on fresh powder.

In many conversations, Kim openly admitted that she missed home and did not understand why people on campus “judge each other with their eyes.” She thought her peers judged people based on their phenotypic appearance without making attempts to get to know them as human beings. Lacking a sense of belonging on campus because she was from Alaska, Kim often did not attend class or preferred spending time with her boyfriend. During our last conversation, she revealed that she had decided to return home to Alaska.

Jennifer

Jennifer has Puerto Rican roots. At school, Jennifer identifies herself as both Indigenous (Taino) and Hispanic, but in Puerto Rico it was forbidden by her family to identify with Taino heritage. In Puerto Rico, the elders know the Taino language and culture, but it is viewed problematically as being without value. As a result, her family encouraged her to identify as Hispanic.

Jennifer’s choice to attend a tribal college created awareness in her of blood quantum issues within tribes in the United States. She discussed how some of her mixed-race friends are “frustrated about how people are viewing them and how they want to fit in.” Most of her conversations on the American Indian identity of her mixed-race friends revolved around blood quantum questions and feelings of needing to prove their identity. On campus, Jennifer has a grounded self-perception: “I just be myself. I don’t have to carry a feather in my pocket.” Her priority as a student is academics.

Amy

Amy identifies as mixed-race, but in our conversations she switched back and forth in saying she was Hispanic or American Indian. She is very fair complexioned with light brown hair, giving her an advantage in situating herself. Throughout our conversations she talked about her Kiowa influences and the meaning of family. Her schooling experiences included describing her friends as Mexican, even though she admitted that they preferred to be identified as Spanish.
I collected data from these participants in several ways: semi-structured, audi-taped, individual interviews, one conducted at the beginning of the study and one at the end; audiotaped whole-group discussions; reflective researcher notes; and the researcher’s personal journal. After consent was secured from each participant, I scheduled meeting dates and times to interview each participant individually. All participants were reminded that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions. I encouraged participants to be forthright and honest. I explained to them that they should not let my personal association with them influence their willingness to share their personal experiences. In order to develop a rapport with each individual prior to whole-group meetings, the first set of individual interviews focused on the students’ racial ideas and experiences. I asked participants to reflect on and respond to questions on identity that emphasized parents/family/home, peers/friendships/dating, and school (e.g., “What racial identity choice do your parents encourage?” “Do you have friends who are mixed?” “In school, what do people assume about your racial identity?”).

I next conducted whole-group discussions, recording these dialogues. The group sessions asked participants to reflect on and describe identity and lived experiences (e.g., “Are there mixed-race people who used their mixedness as an advantage?” “Are there hindering actions by others toward mixed-race people based on their phenotypic features?”). It was my goal that group dialogue would serve as a safe opportunity for participants to raise issues about their heritage, their identity choices, and the racial measurements they experienced in school. My status as a mixed-race educator and my dedication to taking data interpretations back to the participants for validity ensured that the space felt safe. The private setting of the discussions added to the feeling of safety. The collected data were used as texts for analysis.

In the individual interviews at the end of the study, participants were asked questions about how schooling affected their racial identity choice and race consciousness (e.g., “Do you think you act differently around people depending on their race?” “Tell me about a time in school when you changed your racial identity choice to feel accepted or comfortable among peers or teachers.”). In these interviews, as in the first ones, I used open-ended and clarifying prompts, asking questions that encouraged participants to discuss their important lived experiences as mixed-raced students. The individual interviews were semi-structured to allow for a more conversational, shared experience.
Methodology of Study

The interviews [appendixes A and B] lasted between twenty and thirty minutes, and group sessions from sixty to ninety minutes. I took minimal notes during the individual interviews and group sessions to avoid disrupting the comfort of open dialogue. In each interview, participants were asked the same questions, with opportunities for expanded conversations as needed. All interviews and group sessions were transcribed and analyzed, with special emphasis on conversations pertaining to how mixed-race students see themselves and what they experienced as mixed-race students conforming to or resisting racial privilege in an informal and formal setting.

In this research project I used the standard research practices as described by Creswell (1998). Data collected from multiple resources were coded, organized, and condensed into descriptive categories and subcategories (Creswell 1998). Then, I made a comparison and linked the categories and subcategories to pinpoint patterns of descriptions as well as inconsistencies.

My qualitative data analysis was based on data shrinking and interpretation, with the goal of identifying categories and themes. To analyze the data, first I went through each transcript (of interviews and group sessions) and highlighted answers to those questions. Second, responses to those questions that were found to be of interest for the questions being investigated were highlighted. Third, a summarizing interpretation of each highlighted statement was made, thus creating three overarching themes: how mixed-race students and peers perceived themselves; how mixed-race students were raced; and the classroom and campus experiences of mixed-race students. Fourth, the list of themes was copied into separate charts, laying out each participant’s answer to each question of interest. Fifth, from the list of themes, each participant’s combined statements of lived and schooling experiences were studied and categorized as conforming to or resisting race privilege, with supporting quotations as evidence.