Identity Politics of Difference

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PART II

AMERICAN INDIAN MIXED-RACE EXPERIENCE
It evident that what happened in participants’ lives before they arrived on a college campus was crucial to their college experience. The students articulated the influences on their sense of mixed-race identity, particularly family influence and the impact of their schooling and peers. While most students attending college have certain expectations and experiences, mixed-race students attending an American Indian institution have a unique multiracial experience shaped in interaction with the normative monoracial notions of American Indian culture and traditions that exist at Cliff View College. These types of normative notions of culture and tradition are mediated through the racial lens of “hereditary determinism,” which is an ideology rooted in the belief in and aspiration to “pure” blood quantum and an allegedly superior same-race parentage versus inferior mixed-raced parentage (Cramer 2005; Garrotte 2003). Those who can claim pure blood status are seen as being more culturally “authentic” and hence “traditional,” thus linking notions of race with ethnicity.

Since race is a product of white privilege and power, the discourse of mixed-race students at Cliff View College can also be described as acknowledging
races as categories that our society invents and manipulates to reinforce a white supremacist belief in the inherent inferiority of people of color. Logan explained, “I am Native American. I am white. I am both. I am neither. When I hear people criticize white people . . . I am reminded of what I am. In fact, more and more tribes are starting to go white; it’s the popular trend.” This trend can be seen at the micro level as an individual act of race being used for self-interest or for social and political gain (Omi and Winant 1994). Logan’s statement that “I am neither” supports the race politics that are controlled by macro forces that operate beyond the micro individual racial identity. However, it is important to note that Logan’s comment that “it’s the popular trend” for tribes to align themselves with whiteness only pinpoints how some tribes attach importance to the reality of whiteness within a racial hierarchy and, in turn, contribute to the construction of white supremacy through aspiring to get closer to its ways and appearances. As we shall see, Logan’s comment also provides a guide for understanding why certain mixed-raced students at Cliff View College use particular discourses to navigate the racial politics of the institution.

The mixed-race students in this study acknowledge that many at Cliff View employ the idea of hereditary determinism, which places people into fixed, seemingly natural racialized categories. Many students who identify as being full-bloods or who phenotypically fit the stereotype of being American Indian (brown complexion, straight, dark brown or black hair, braided hair, etc.) have already negotiated their racial identity prior to arrival at a tribal college. Through their negotiations, mixed-race students have actively participated in race essentialist notions that one’s membership can be questioned if one does not possess the essential physical traits. Race essentialism, a primary tool of hereditary determinism, is used as a mechanism of social division and racial stratification. For example, Logan stated, “I used to think that light-skinned Natives were posers. I still mostly do. However, it isn’t their fault they were born pasty.” As Thompson (2005) explains, “The racial classification developed during and after the colonial era ordered races into a system which claimed to identify behavior expectations and human potential, and hence carried with it an implication for a hierarchy of humankind” (61). The choice to actively negotiate a racial identity as a “mixed-race” person is a deliberate attempt to separate inferior and superior unions within a race paradigm in that it reifies the notion of purity, or “non–mixed race.” In fact, the
degree to which a mixed-race person negotiates race only reinforces existing races as pure, fixed, and static categories (Chandler 1997).

For example, Logan described hereditary determinism through a race essentialist lens of the “already negotiated racial identity” and expectation of being a student at a tribal college: “Full bloods and those who are phenotypically completely Native . . . sometimes do carry a chip on their shoulder. You know . . . like, you owe me . . . I’m full blood . . . I’ve got it owed to me and that’s why I’m gonna excel . . . you should give it to me.”

Similarly, many mixed-race students who identify as Native American or acknowledge their Nativeness have been functioning within their comfort zone relative to their choice to identify as mixed race. The choice of attending a tribal college places mixed-race students in a position of negotiating their identity yet again. Nonetheless, at Cliff View only certain forms of racial mixedness are allowed the opportunity to negotiate identity, that is, to claim both Nativeness and mixed race. Mixed-race students who phenotypically appear black have added challenges relative to those who appear non-black that make it difficult to claim Nativeness or, for that matter, mixed-race identity. The overall seemingly immutable imbalances of power predetermine the mixed-race experience at this tribal college, often revolving around the conceptualization of the social and political politics of Indianness. The larger picture of power imbalances at play indicates how the in/authenticity of Indianness is defined by whiteness and how white supremacy “determines relations to power, the re/production of labor divisions and property, the construction of social status, and the context and script of race struggles” (Allen 2006, 10).

Logan’s references to “posers” and “those who are phenotypically completely Native” are examples of how the power influences of whiteness have changed the meaning of Indianness over time, but also affected the power relations and the social status of imagery of the authentic and inauthentic identity of Indianness. As Deloria (1998) explains, “The authentic, as numerous scholars have pointed out, is a culturally constructed category created in opposition to a perceived state of inauthenticity. The authentic serves as a way to imagine and idealize the real, the traditional, and the organic in opposition to the less satisfying qualities of everyday life. The ways people construct authenticity depend upon both the traumas that defined the maligned inauthentic and upon the received heritage in the authentic past” (101).
The problem posed in this study is that the long-standing race politics of authentic versus inauthentic Indianness has become redefined around a new set of concerns, that is, the identities of mixed-race American Indians (Cramer 2005; Garrouette 2003). The influences of the power dynamics of whiteness have become ingrained in the meaning of Indianness. Students’ mixed-race identity choice at Cliff View can then be viewed as a struggle with the “interior and exterior Indian Others” (Deloria 1998) or, in other words, as conforming to or resisting a racialized social and political structure that places a material and symbolic value on the Indian-as-nature. Whites project onto those they have constructed as “Indian” what they believe they have lost via modernization; to the white imagination the “Indian” must embody oneness with nature so as to counterbalance the banality of modern white existence. Thus, whiteness associates purity, in both cultural and racial forms, as closeness to nature, a nature that is eroding due to the excesses of development.

Studies of mixed-race identity choice do not necessarily focus on how a certain identity choice can be viewed as either conforming to or resisting a racialized social and political structure. And most studies do not seek to show how schooling experiences influence mixed-race students’ racial identity strategies. This study sought to fill that void. Through interviews and group sessions that focused on students’ mixed-race experiences, it became apparent that their racial self-perceptions were developed in response to social interactions in which various social actors assigned or ascribed certain mixed-race identities. In other words, they were “raced.”

The issues at hand for self-perception are not only mixed-race identity strategies but how race is viewed as being “real,” not a concept based on white privilege and power. Students in this study described their experiences from early childhood to the present. They identified as one race, one race and mixed race, both races, or mixed race. Factors that impacted the identity choice of mixed-race students’ identity included physical appearance, others’ expectations, and affirmation or rejection by peers.

Identity Politics of Blood Quantum

Mixed-race identity can be seen through a colonial lens that began no later than 1705 with blood quantum laws or Indian blood laws: legislation enacted to define membership in American Indian groups. “Blood quantum” refers to
attempts to calculate the degree of tribal racial inheritance of a given individual. Virginia adopted laws in 1705 that made both a person of “American race” (which at that time meant “Indian”) and a person of half-American race (i.e., a “half blood”) legally inferior. However, the notion of blood quantum was not widely used as overt public racial policy until the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 whereby the US government documented whom it considered American Indian.

Furthermore, when the US censuses were taken in 1930 and 1940, many mixed-race people of black and American Indian descent were classified as black. Racial classification based on the one-drop rule has negatively affected many individuals with black and American Indian descent because they are unable to prove residence on a reservation or prove that they meet the required ancestry to be enrolled in a tribe.

The societal and political experiences of American Indians and blacks today are very different. “Indianness” is often exoticized, whereas “blackness” is denigrated. Society teaches us to categorize people so we understand who they are, what stereotypes they fit into, and how they should act and we should act toward them so that they can be kept under control. One of the primary societal categories used as a form of control is race. Among my participants, the most glaring difference in racial(ized) self-perceptions existed between those who identified as black/American Indian and nonblack/American Indian. As their experiences reveal, blackness affected racial identity in ways not perceived by the simple mathematical proportions conveyed through blood quantum, meaning that the one-drop rule seemed present in how blood quantum and cultural authenticity was socially practiced.

Tony has always acknowledged being mixed race, but his mother’s warning that “you are always going to be viewed as a black person because people view your skin before they view everything else” molded his perceptions of being raced. He shared an anecdote from his family history illustrating the point:

I remember hearing a lot of stories . . . My grandmother . . . my mother’s mother, is very dark. You know, but when you look at her, she does not look typical of a Native southern black woman. But then again her daughter is very light, and I remember even when I was a kid we used to walk down the street—they used to say . . . you know . . . nice friend . . . this . . . this and that . . . My mother was born when my grandmother was fifteen years old. So their ages
are really close. And she would say . . . “No, that’s my mother” . . . What! And you could see the shift . . . everything is cool and then she says, “This is my mother” and then it freaking happens . . . there is a line drawn.

Tony’s story is an example of the perceived biological aspects of phenotype and skin tone. The reality of blackness cannot be easily separated from the issues of power that have been historically embedded in society. Tony’s phrase “there is a line drawn” distinctively describes a moment of racial exclusion, the repulsion of blackness at the level of micro-aggression, which on a larger scale creates discriminatory effects for blacks and those who identify with their blackness. Consequently, the “drawn line” is the societal manifestation of the racial hierarchy at the level of everyday life, with the white race on top and blacks perpetually at the bottom.

Relationships between and among family members shaped how the students approached the issue of mixed-race identity. As Pulera (2002) notes, “Parents differ on how they acculturate their children to mixed-race identities” (40). Kathy recounts her childhood familiarity with racial politics and identity:

I remember growing up as a kid knowing that I was part Cherokee and being ashamed of it. Because . . . I mean, we are talking little kids . . . like eight . . . nine . . . ten. For starters . . . you know . . . the stereotypes I’ve grown up with about [how] Natives were Indians on the Plains . . . warrior . . . the fighters. The other side . . . I look at the Cherokees and they were just like the white people . . . what the hell. But there were things going on with me as a kid . . . my family was ashamed of being part Native. That sort of thing . . . you know . . . but it wasn’t until later that I actually read our history.

Kathy’s perspective was shaped by her family’s desire for an “authentic blackness” untainted by a history of white violence. She associated Indianness with the group she was most familiar with, the Cherokees, and thus associated that form of Indianness with whiteness. This conflicted with her parents’ desires for a pro-black orientation. At the same time, she had internalized negative stereotypes about American Indians in the western United States, against whom she measures the authenticity of Cherokees. Kathy also expressed dismay at the fact that people who look phenotypically white, like many Cherokees, ironically have an easier time claiming Indianness than those who look black, such as herself.
Experience with the rules of hypodescent manifested in adult family relations. Tony, who is married to a Navajo woman, describes how hypodescent plays out in his interactions with his in-laws:

Uhm . . . [my wife] has a huge family . . . half of her family is really cool . . . in general they are all cool . . . upfront and in your face. There are no issues . . . at the same time . . . it’s about knowing who’s who and the true mask comes off in your face and it comes out. Her older sister has really crazy issues in terms of race and I’ll say . . . I would definitely have to say that she is a racist. The kids come around . . . her children and they have brothers and sisters . . . Navajo traditions and they have no problems, but I know as soon as we walk out that door . . . it’s like the talk of the town. The word spreads fast and we are just like . . . wow. A lot has to do with the social class within . . . maybe jealousy . . . a lot of social class issues because you guys were in California and maybe because my wife left the reservation and . . . you know, it’s like all of those issues. Besides all of that . . . the bottom line is that these guys are still part of your blood . . . this is your sister’s kids . . . it doesn’t matter. When my kids go over there . . . it’s like . . . you can hear a pin drop and they know it, but they are strong enough . . . we have taught them well enough to where they can handle that. Well . . . that whole thing . . . it just sorta plays itself out.

Authentic Indianness is not simply about purity. It is also about what type of (so-called) impurity is recognized and what is excluded. In mixed-race American Indian identity, blackness is treated as something to be denigrated and pushed away, unlike whiteness or even Latino-ness. Being black/American Indian mixed race threatens the definition of Indianness in that it moves its association closer to that of blacks and away from nonblacks—namely, whites.

In this way, race politics, both within and between races, can determine one’s experiences of racial in/authenticity. Logan, born of a full-blood Creek father and white mother, states, “I come from a divorced family. I lived with my mother, who’s Anglo and part Eastern Shawnee. And . . . I was the oldest child living in the house and also the only Native American child at the time. And so . . . it wasn’t much of an issue . . . I have loving and supportive family on both sides. I’ve been taught to be proud of all of me, both the white and Native side.” As a result of how whiteness influences the power dynamics of
the material values of race, Logan’s authenticity is not questioned or viewed as having lower social status. This stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of Tony and Kathy. When white/American Indian mixed-race people like Logan are encouraged to be “proud of all of me” and black/American Indian mixed-race people like Tony and Kathy are given messages about the inferiority of their blackness, racial hierarchy is reinforced, a hierarchy in which whiteness increases your social value while blackness decreases it.

Samantha has parental support similar to Logan’s, but different in the sense that her parents, a Navajo father and white mother, encourage her to have a fluid, interchangeable identity.

Uhm . . . they just tell me to be whoever I wanna be. Like . . . they don’t really say a specific racial type cause they know me as Samantha, not as like Navajo or white . . . so . . . they really don’t look at it like that. Our extended families are pretty distant. And we really don’t talk with them much anyways. Like . . . I have an aunt in Canada . . . an aunt in Utah . . . an uncle in Texas. And like . . . I’ll keep in contact with some of my cousins . . . we’ll say like “hey” and stuff, but it won’t be like in depth at all. It just never comes up that way.

Samantha’s fair complexion and phenotypically white features allow her to have a fluid, interchangeable identity, while Logan, brown-complexioned, phenotypically appearing American Indian, is not allowed that type of flexibility. In truth, the encouragement of Samantha’s parents to “be whoever you wanna be” ignores the racial constructs of whiteness and reinforces its privilege and oppressive position (Taylor 1998).

Such acts can also be viewed as a color-blind perspective that evolves into new forms of racism, expanding the boundaries of whiteness as it becomes associated with freedom of racial identity choice, so long as one is close enough to whiteness. Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2006) describe this new racial-social reality as three-tiered, consisting of: (1) an intermediate racial group that buffers racial conflict, much like the middle class does in a class analysis lens; (2) a dominant white racial strata; and (3) a bottom-tier “collective black” strata that incorporates many dark-skinned immigrants (37). This means that only certain raced groups will be accepted as the “buffer group,” the group closest to white without actually being white, while others will be deemed the collective black. The consequence is to ensure limited access to whiteness; the one-drop rule will be modified (e.g., allowing those who
approximate close enough to whiteness to “be whoever they wanna be”), and blood quantum politics will heighten the manifestation of white political power within a given historical context.

Tribes will align with the white power structure to the extent that whiteness is embraced as an authentic part of Indianness and blackness is rejected as inauthentic. This racialization of authentic Indianness challenges the current new age notions of Indianness that claim that one need only be “culturally” Indian in order to be authentically American Indian (Deloria 1998). As we have seen, race is still a major component in determining American Indian identity. As one participant, Logan, described it, tribes are “starting to go white; it’s the popular trend.” And a major ideological feature of whiteness is opposition to blackness. A certain social and political ideology that is filtered through a larger white hegemony will take precedence to advance the mechanisms that allow for racial stratification. Once again, race essentialism will continue to hinder a stance against racism, as will inattention to the realities of racial privilege and hierarchy. As Spencer (1999) asserts, “The challenge for America lies in determining how to move away from the fallacy of race while remaining aggressive in the battle against racism” (167).

Although the students encountered different family and parental situations based on their mixedness, the prior experiences of race dynamics for all nine were relevant to how they viewed race as a symbol. Seeing race this way played into the reassigning of human value, whether it was “drawing a line” or “being ashamed” of certain mixedness. The experiences of the students might lead one to conclude that the alliances between whites and nonblacks will continue to reinforce a racial hierarchy of “us” and “them,” as blacks, descendants of blacks, and those deemed “honorary blacks” continue to hold a denigrated position. Regardless of the history of multiraciality, blackness is not fluid nor does it come with an option “to be whoever you wanna be.” The same was true for participants in this study who were seen as black. For all participants, prior experience of skin politics and the historical construction of race indicated how there were varying experiences reinforced by one’s mixedness.

Self-Perceptions of Race Asserted, Negotiated, and Redefined

Understanding the patterns of how race is asserted, negotiated, and often redefined for some participants provides an image of how self-perceptions
of blood quantum are often used to self-label and assert, or avow, an identity. But in some cases, as in Logan’s, being mixed race did not have an impact on views of “whiteness” or “Indianness.”

The relationship between Logan’s American Indian/white (but identifies as white) mother and his American Indian father provided him with early positive exposure to the interaction between races. While his father’s family had a much stronger cultural and traditional connection, Logan did not struggle with a negative perception toward blacks or whites, being reared in a community where, he stated, “The black ghetto meets the Indian ghetto.” Logan further explains,

My white side of the family loves the fact that I am Native and . . . partly because they have the same . . . uhm . . . cultural background but it was never reported. So, because of all that nonsense that they’re not Native. And then on my dad’s side . . . we have just as many half Indians/half whites as we do half black/whites. So, it’s just completely accepted and they love us . . . you know, just the same . . . there’s no differentiation between . . . cultural worth. Just ’cause you’re half doesn’t make you less than a whole. Our Freedmen are still members of our tribe and I take a certain amount of pride in that because I think that’s the way it should be . . . you know . . . if it was good enough for our ancestors . . . it should be good enough for us. Those people who had been descendants of slaves and were members of the tribe and then married out of it . . . chose to ignore their Creek heritage, but there are black people at home that I know are Indian. That is just how they chose to identify.

When I asked Logan how our conversation about mixed-race identity made him feel, he stated:

It doesn’t really bother me. One thing that . . . here’s an interesting point . . . mixed race and phenotypically non-Native-looking people are more sensitive about their identity. And I would agree because . . . I mean that it is justified but like, someone like me would no doubt have a complete different experience than someone that looks phenotypically black and identifies as Native. I look full-blood Native . . . I come from a community where mixed race is not an issue, so I have a very unique situation where I’m accepted as I am.

So, Logan acknowledges that it means something different to be seen as black and identify as Native. Yet, Logan then went on to claim that he looked
“full-blood Native” and that where he comes from “mixed race is not an issue.” He dismisses his privilege, or at least distances himself from its construction, at the same time that he acknowledges it. Also, Logan disliked hearing negative comments about whites because his mother identifies as white, but he acknowledges her Nativeness. He came to accept through our discussions that the comments are a reflection of historical oppression by the larger white society.

The white preference of Logan’s mother, who seemed to have rejected an option to associate with her Nativeness, simply emphasizes that whiteness is seldom questioned. And there is a history among American Indian people of encouraging the claiming of whiteness when possible. However, claims to whiteness were received selectively. Morning (2003) provides an imperative historical account that explains why Logan’s mother’s can identify as white while acknowledging her Nativeness: “Individuals of white and Indian origin could be designated as white if their communities recognized them as such, and those of Indian and black origin could be recorded as Indian. In contrast, mulattos were afforded no such options; no amount of community recognition could legitimate the transformation from black to white” (47). Darker-skinned individuals are not allowed the same privilege as individuals with lighter skin in American Indian groups, and thus the social structure of American Indian groups plays a role in the construction of whiteness.

Stacey’s strong cultural family ties directly influenced her identity as a mixed-race person who identifies as American Indian. Probably as a result of the Navajo Nation not formally accepting blood quantum law until the 1950s, mixed-race Navajo participants had varying influences on how they perceived themselves. Stacey explains,

I choose to be Navajo because that’s how I’ve been brought up and raised. You know . . . my grandparents would always talk to me in Navajo when I was younger, just being brought up traditionally. So, I just consider myself more Navajo than the other races . . . German and Mexican.¹ My whole family, pretty much . . . ’cause it’s like they say that if you’re . . . in our clan system . . . your first clan is your mom and your second clan is your dad. Whichever is your first clan is like who you are . . . so it’s like . . . my dad is German and Mexican—that’s like my second clan. But my first clan is Navajo from my mom. Uhm . . . my mom didn’t want me to be like, I don’t know,
like going through this big old identity crisis... you know? She didn’t... she honestly kinda doesn’t like white people so much ’cause like... some people are just like really bad... you know? She wanted me to have respect for myself... for my own identity... you know?

Stacey’s family experience is an example of how one’s mixedness determines if one’s authenticity will be questioned or not. And although Stacey is mixed race (white/Hispanic), her authenticity was not questioned in comparison to the family experiences of Tony’s children, who are black/American Indian mixed-race.

Sometimes colorism played a role in the treatment of the students. There is a racialized process of the politics of pigmentation being re-created out of a larger context of white power dynamics. Hunter (2005) explains: “Whites assigned meanings to whiteness, blackness, and brownness that valued them each differently. As an abstract concept, whiteness is believed to represent civility, intelligence, and beauty, and in contrast, blackness and brownness are seen as representing primitiveness, ignorance, and ugliness. These abstract concepts took on representations in the form of actual physical traits associated with each racial group” (49).

Colorism is not only an issue within the black community, it is also a determinant of social status within American Indian populations. Stacey described her sibling’s experience with colorism as a mixed-race brown person.

Something my sister told me... like... when she would meet some white kids and stuff and, I don’t know, they... they would be talking about races and stuff. And... they would say like, “Ooh... I’m part Cherokee,”... say, like an eighth or something. My sister would be like, “Well, I’m part German,” and they be like, “What? You? But your skin is really brown”... and they be like, “You can’t be part German”... you know. Looking at her like that... I don’t know... when she told me that, I just kinda saw both views... like from the white person trying to claim that they are part Cherokee... now my sister was like, “What?” But when she said she was part German... you know, they were sort of really puzzled about that.

It is revealing, to say the least, that Stacey’s claim to Indianness was given more credence than her sister’s claim to whiteness. The social construction of race makes it more difficult to look past the color of skin to explain the differences
Racial(ized) Self-Perceptions

between “what are you” and “who you are.” This weakens Root’s (1996) assertion that mixed-race people would disrupt racial classification schemes (hereditary determinism, lighter-skinned versus darker-skinned, etc.).

Anthony describes the pressures of being raced:

Based on appearance, I am light complexioned and I am believed to be Anglo instead of Hispanic. I had to prove my racial background to others because I phenotypically appear white. And a lot of times on standardized tests, I didn’t know what to choose ’cause I was like . . . I am Hispanic but no one believes me. So, should I just put white? I don’t know why I felt like that. I just always felt like I had to prove myself. Because everyone was just like, . . . “Well, you just don’t seem like Hispanic” or whatever.

As a result of Anthony’s skin color, his authenticity is questioned based on a reinforced racialized classification scheme. Skin color is used as a reinforcement tool. The social and political forces of skin color conflict create a darker-skinned versus lighter-skinned hierarchy that defines in/authenticity for group association and membership.

Stacey had a similar experience of being raced. “First, I went to school with a bunch of Navajos . . . [who] like look at me and call me a white girl . . . you know? I was like . . . I’m not white . . . I’m half Navajo.” Anthony’s and Stacey’s experiences exemplify how the expectation is internalized that race is a “real” concept and puts pressure on mixed-race students to choose a group association that aligns with the social and political norms of racial rules.

Kim made a racial identity choice based on how society has categorized her according to her skin color and facial features, regardless of the fact that her mother is Alaska Native/white. “Well, I actually identify myself as . . . Alaskan . . . as Aleutic . . . Alaskan Native because my dad is full, or so he says, full Alaskan Native. And . . . I just look Native, so it’s just what I go by. If somebody asks me what else I was I would . . . I would tell them Russian or German because the . . . German is my last name.”

Kim’s decision to identify as Alaska Native aligns with what others assume her phenotypic image portrays. Kim’s understanding of outside perceptions thus shaped her racial self-identity. Her situation fits that described by Lopez (2003), who found that while some participants resisted ascribed identities, many conformed their self-identity to meet the assumptions of others. The control mechanisms of outside perceptions that influence self-identity are
created by societal norms, white privilege, and power. White people never have to question their racial identity, because it is expected and known “what they are.” The integral nature of white privilege and whites’ inability to self-reflect about the meaning of being a white person suggest there are no outside perceptions that influence “what they are.” Yet, most white people know they are white because the world tells them so.

The story of Stacey’s sister is similar to that of other students. Since skin color is the most enduring construct of a system of race and the most difficult to change, colorism then becomes a structural barrier to moving away from race. Logan explains a family experience of colorism and hypodescent. “My aunt has three mixed children, all from three separate black fathers. So, it’s even in our own family . . . we love those kids to death, but you know . . . my aunt’s mom still has derogatory comments about black people in the presence of her grand-babies. You know . . . I mean . . . I don’t know. We all know that it’s wrong and yet . . . it happens.”

Unfortunately, the effects of blood quantum and skin color have manifested a perception of how Indianness is defined, while simultaneously, a racialized process reenacts the denigration of certain mixedness. As Lawrence (1987) argues: “To the extent that this cultural belief system has influenced us all, we are all racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experiences have influenced our beliefs” (322).

Kathy’s prior struggles over how her “blackness” shapes her “Indianness” has created an awakened awareness of how she is perceived on campus.

I think phenotypically is like—obviously they say, “She’s a black girl.” Here . . . at this school . . . I wonder if it would have been easier for me to say I’m black [rather than Native]. I wonder if I would have had an easier existence here on this campus. I tend to wonder is there . . . a difference between an individual who is and how they are perceived as mixed white and Native or whatever? Is there a difference, because it seems like in my experience it’s kinda like, . . . “Ooh . . . you can’t be Native . . . you are part black” or “You are black” or whatever. And I’m like, learn something about your history and something about the East Coast and you might figure it out. But it seems like . . . especially here at school . . . it’s like, . . . “Oh . . . well . . . you are pretending” or “You couldn’t possibly be.” And I’m really curious, why do people believe that there is a physiological impossibility for that mixture?
As a result of Kathy’s experiences, being mixed race with black has placed her socially and culturally in an inauthentic category. Not only is she viewed as being black regardless of her mixedness, she is also not accepted into American Indian group membership, unlike nonblack/American Indian mixed-race participants.

Tony gave details of a similar experience at Cliff View:

Most people on this campus that say that they are full blooded in fact aren’t full blooded. So in class when they view someone else’s opinion [as] more valid or . . . more important because I’m this or that or I look this way or look that way . . . those are the things that are just mind blowing. I shoot them down every chance I get when I’m in that type of mentality, but I don’t like to be that way. Because by nature, I’m not that way . . . I’m more of an optimist . . . I try to, like, give people the benefit of the doubt until they prove themselves to me otherwise. I find that a lot of people here carry a lot of racial and prejudice baggage. And all I can say is that there is a major difference between having white blood in you versus any other type. And it draws a line even within your own race and you often question yourself a lot of times before you come to terms with yourself and feel good about yourself. You go through a lot of trauma.

Historically, people who had the slightest trace of black blood were forced into an identification category of black. The identity politics of blood quantum for American Indians has been significantly different than it has been for blacks. As a result, there is a different perception of colorism that validates blood quantum by skin color, which impairs the ability of American Indians who are mixed race with black to become a member of a group. The social and political reality of alienation for black mixedness is different from white mixedness on an everyday level at Cliff View College. Black mixed-race participants such as Kathy and Tony experienced alienation by being positioned as outsiders based on their phenotypic appearance. They are grouped as outsiders solely because they lack the phenotypic traits associated with an insider racial membership, thus challenging the notion that Indianness is practiced primarily as an ethnic or cultural identity (Deloria 1998). Phenotypic traits associated with race include skin color, hair texture, and facial features (Hunter 2005; Lee 2005; Lewis 2005; Lopez 2003).
Hall (2008) explains the identity politics of blood quantum for certain racial mixtures (e.g., white versus black mixedness) thus: “(a) African-mixed Native Americans may be seen as wanting to escape the social stigma associated with being ‘black,’ and (b) discrimination on basis of their dark skin may disqualify them [from American Indian membership] because of appearance; unlike their lighter-skinned European mixed counterparts, they are more physically similar to African American” (36). Under the circumstances of social and political influence, the oppressive assimilation of colorism has shaped, transformed, and constructed a racial hierarchy that validates the dominant race’s categorical status. The acceptance of an American Indian whose race is mixed with white over one mixed with black has resulted in a postcolonial ideology of assimilation through white ways, culture, and racism. Hall (2008) gives an example:

Chris Simon, a professional hockey player and member of the Ojibwa tribe, was fined $35,585 and suspended three games for apparently directing racial slurs toward a black player named Mike Grier. . . . The behavior of a Native American player in a predominantly white sport is comparable to that of their slave owning ancestors, but there has also been criticism by Native Americans of blacks playing on sport teams that degrade them by the use of such mascots as the NFL’s Washington “Redskins” and the major league baseball team the Cleveland “Indians.” (36)

These are examples of creating alienation based on one race being “denigrated” versus the popularity and profitability of being American Indian.

Identifying as American Indian has an economic value, whereas identifying as black comes with no sovereignty or access to economic advantages. According to Vine Deloria Jr. (1999), “With the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, it became profitable to be an Indian” (231). As a result, in today’s era of Indianness, there are a significant number of people who choose to acknowledge their American Indian heritage simply to take advantage of services or special accommodations (educational scholarships, medical benefits, etc.). Unquestionably, one result of the 1980 census allowing people to identify their racial background themselves for the first time has been a change in the race dynamics of contemporary North American society. Analyzing an example of “playing the race card” in reverse, Deloria shows how self-selected identity can be used
to navigate through racialized social and political barriers within political institutions: “Colleges and universities today give preference in admission to minorities, and it may well be that non-Indians, eager to obtain admission to law schools or colleges of medicines, are claiming Indian ancestry in order to leapfrog their fellow applicants who seek admission on the basis of merit alone. The American Indian Law Center in New Mexico reports that it continues to be astounded at the number of alleged Indians attending law schools in various parts of the country” (233). Both “playing the race card” and self-perceptions of blood quantum politics are racialized pressures for mixed-race students who identify as American Indian to behave or maintain group associations based on Indianness.

Logan explains his views on the strategy of cultural authenticity in gaining racial group membership:

I find it interesting that some mixed-race individuals cling to stereotypical imagery as their connection to their cultures. We’ve seen the part-black woman go into ghetto mode when she’s around her black friends, or the part-Native man who embraces and enhances their connection with the earth and the Great Spirit. It wouldn’t bother me as much if these individuals would pick a theme and stick to it. Don’t play your Eastern Band Cherokee fantasies by dressing in the Northeast style and not missing the nearest powwow . . . ever heard of a stomp dance in a turban, ’cause guess what? That’s your cultural identity. Of course, it isn’t unheard [of] to see full bloods doing the same thing, so . . . when in Rome. But . . . previously . . . I had considered it unnecessary, almost to the point of calling it a weakness. I now think that playing the race card is necessary in some respects. I feel that on a societal level, it is impossible to progress without first knowing where it is you come from. In today’s society, minorities are criminally discriminated against. In that instance, I think playing the race card is justified and necessary.

Logan’s comments of in/authenticity further describe the race politics of Indianness. Not only does skin color play a role in your group association, but also the politics of how one acts in a certain manner makes him or her an active participant in racialized hierarchy. Logan’s perspective that “playing the race card is justified and necessary” does not take into account that playing that card only upholds being raced, while certain raced groups will be continuously denigrated.
Although Amy acknowledges her Nativeness, her ascribed lack of cultural Indianness affected her personal life.

I grew up in Santa Fe. And very few white friends. I don’t never want to date a white person because they got no culture. Uhm . . . just recently . . . like, a year ago, I was dating a Taos, a Taos Native and [he] was exactly what I wanted. He was very into his culture from one of the Pueblos. And he seemed to really respect and love that, and that’s what I really loved about him. He spoke his language, which is so rare to find [laughs] . . . But I wasn’t Native enough for him. I wasn’t a little Taos girl . . . who was into doing the Taos tradition. So, it didn’t end up working out and that was the main reason.

Amy was unwilling to play the “authenticity card” to become accepted and was affected by the drawing of boundaries.

Many of the participants acknowledged that to gain access to certain groups meant knowing how to maneuver through that group’s particular social norms. Samantha’s willingness to appear more authentic included changing her behavior and choice of conversation depending on the particular racial group with which she was interacting.

I act differently around people depending on their race because each race of people has a different way of acting, and by acting as they do . . . then I don’t offend anyone or make them feel uncomfortable. But I’ve always been aware that I’m mixed race, so when I’m at school I guess the only time I felt more of an award was when I was told that I looked white. I changed my racial identity by feeling more of that race. Like in Window Rock, I felt white but I would try to feel Native by playing basketball really well.

Samantha was able to navigate her group association based on her mixedness and phenotypic appearance. In her case, she had the advantage of being more phenotypically white, and she understood how to manipulate her mixedness to gain access to certain group associations. As we will see next, Samantha’s experience is much different from that of a dark-complexed black/American Indian mixed-race person. Black/American Indian participants had a more difficult time being included in white and, in certain situations, American Indian racial groups.

Kathy, a mixed-race person who phenotypically appears black and acknowledges her Nativeness, gave a different perspective of playing the game of
American Indian authenticity. “I’m viewed as black even though I identify with my Native American heritage more often. I don’t have the option in many cases other than the fact that I identify as a mixed-race Native American that is not an enrolled member of a tribe. The catch is around black people. I’m a sellout . . . meaning I look a certain way [black] . . . and . . . I identify with my Native American side.” Kathy’s lived experience of her authenticity, both black and American Indian, being questioned hints at the power dynamics at play in group association.

In a more resistant tone, Tony proclaims, “I can only just be me. If acknowledging who I am and where I come from to some people is playing the race card to some sort of advantage . . . that’s crazy. Then, you know . . . they need to deal with their own issues. It’s their problem, not mine. I am who I am . . . regardless.” Although Kathy internalizes her ascribed identity and Tony refuses his, the common denominator of both their perspectives is that they have been racially positioned at a certain location within a larger racial order. Blacks see Nativeness as a higher-status location and thus challenge Kathy’s identifying upward. As evidenced by the treatment of blacks within tribes, American Indians see blacks as a lower-status group. So it is not surprising that Tony and Kathy’s Nativeness was questioned and often denied by other American Indians. Their reactions to exclusion and racial positioning bring to the surface the historical experiences of black mixed-race persons. Contrary to DaCosta’s (2007) claim that multiraciality is a new experience, the multiraciality of today encompasses older experiences of US racial power dynamics and their role in forming group associations.

Family factors often played a role in how the participants viewed group association. Families were important in how participants came to understand the meaning and politics of phenotypic appearance within a system of colorism. Tony explains his family’s perceptions of race and colorism: “I can say personally my family is a big melting pot. My grandmother was like, half white. There is a big issue with that in my family, whereas you have the dividing line between the lighter skin and the darker skin.” When asked how he felt about this form of skin politics, Tony stated, “I would say the biggest pain is when it comes from your own family . . . direct immediate family. Now that’s the biggest part, especially when you don’t understand and it doesn’t make sense.” To Tony, this whole business of privileging light skin seemed absurd, especially when it involved loved ones.
This is a clear example of how skin color plays a significant role in how one views race as a byproduct of the social and political influences of a racialized hierarchy. To better understand colorism in this context, it is important to dissect the social controls of race through a Critical Race Theory lens and unveil how race is convoluted through the racial discourses of colorism. Since the implications of “whiteness” are seen through a “racial perspective or worldview” (Leonardo 2002, 31), the meaning of Indianness seen through a lens of blood quantum and the “one-drop rule” shapes the perspectives of what a particular group deems as “normal” group membership characteristics. In other words, if one group is normalized based on a particular set of characteristics defined within, and by, a white supremacist hierarchical system, it causes an “action-reaction” effect of the other groups to view themselves in terms of racialized characteristics (e.g., dark versus light skin, where light skin is assigned a higher social value). For example, light-skinned slaves were sold at a higher price than dark-skinned slaves. “At slave auctions, [slave masters] would almost pay five times more for a house slave than a field slave showing that they were more valuable (a field slave could be bought for almost sixteen hundred dollars, while the going rate for a ‘fancy’ girl was almost five thousand dollars)” (Byrd and Tharps 2001, 19). Tony’s experience of having a “dividing line” in his family based on skin complexion indicates why he would view race as being a kind of absurd game whose players “need to deal with their own issues,” as if they suffered from a form of mental illness. The complex meaning of race, and its interrelatedness to skin color and hair texture, infiltrates political and social domains at the personal and cognitive levels.

William Katz (1986), the author of Black Indians, stated, “Black Indians, like other Afro-Americans, have been treated by writers as invisible” (5). Katz is criticized by hooks (1992) for not acknowledging how whiteness has made the black mixed-raced Native American “invisible.” Katz’s argument that “observers, not expecting to find Africans among Indians, did not report their presence” (5) understates the distorted racial history of whiteness. But his omission of not acknowledging the power structures that define being “invisible” does not capture the lens of how blackness has been denigrated historically. Tony, a brown-skinned descendant of black, white, and Native American heritage, discussed how he has experienced his invisibility as an American Indian: “I think that I don’t peg myself as being ‘Hey, look . . . I’m
African American.’ But I . . . include . . . my total . . . you know? . . . I recognize and I do include my Native American roots. But most only see me as African American.” The context for what Tony has experienced is shaped by a racial system that promotes whiteness as the model of humanity, and blackness as the opposite. The racist discrimination against dark-skinned American Indians by those who are light skinned as a result of white heritage is rooted in the same racial system that allows for the alienation of dark-skinned Native Americans on the basis of the “one-drop rule” associated with blackness (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992).

Jennifer, a product of Puerto Rico’s Spanish, Indigenous, and African mestizaje who identifies as Taino (Native) and Hispanic, indicates how societal norms assign “whiteness” a higher value in a nonwhite group.

The way I kinda see it . . . we still have that way of looking at people . . . you look at their appearance. Like if we see . . . like a black Native as opposed to a white Native and I think people still see white people as . . . like this symbol of power and strength because of that fact that they are majority. And . . . so if a white person will say that I am Cherokee . . . they still hold that . . . the fact that they are still majority and people won’t say as much as opposed to someone who . . . who is black and Native. Like . . . we always have prejudgments but kind of pretending or whatever. But we see the white person as more of a symbol of authority than we do the black person.

Jennifer’s comment that “we see the white person as more of a symbol of authority than we do the black person” indicates that the history of mixedness in the black race has not elevated their status out of the basement. In fact, a substantial number of blacks have both white and American Indian ancestry. Persons in New Mexico with white, Spanish, and American Indian ancestry can be considered “Hispanic” or “mestizo.” Similarly, in some South American countries those with black, white, and American Indian ancestry would also be labeled mestizo. For various reasons, the meaning of mestizo in New Mexico is grounded in “whiteness,” making white mixedness an advantageous social power. However, those who appear phenotypically black have a more difficult time claiming mestizo status, unlike those who are light or medium skinned. Nieto-Phillips (2004) explains the New Mexican Spanish identity perspective of “whiteness”: “In the quest for full inclusion in the nation’s body politic, the challenge for Nuevomexiancos, then, was to establish their whiteness and,
with the rise of the Mexican immigration in the early years of the twentieth century, to distance themselves from ‘Mexicans from Mexico.’ But in the most politicized form, the Spanish ethos allowed Nuevomexicanos to lay claim to whiteness as an argument for full inclusion in the nation’s body politic” (48–49).

Since whiteness historically depicts both power and privilege, the New Mexican Spanish identity was developed to distinctively isolate people so designated from being deemed as having a lesser racial value. By claiming whiteness as an identity, they are further denigrating all other raced groups in order to become more “whitened” versus being considered “blackened,” but also aspiring to create an inroad for authentic group association. And most specifically, they drew a sharp line between black and nonblack, eliminating any notion of blackness as a feature of the Nuevomexicano mestizaje (Nieto-Phillips 2004). The anti-blackness of the United States created a situation where any acceptance of blackness in the Nuevomexicano identity would prevent New Mexico from becoming a state. Nativeness, while denigrating and demonized, was not treated with the same level of repulsion as blackness (Nieto-Phillips 2004).

An example of the how lighter skin is viewed as having social and political worth can be seen in an incident described by Logan. He explained that a mixed-raced, light-skinned faculty member at Cliff View College who identified as American Indian was viewed as having higher racial status. By allowing his skin complexion to become a form of status, Logan contended, this faculty member allowed himself to be used to assign darker-skinned American Indians less intellectual capital, and therefore less personal worth.

There was a story that a faculty member told me . . . where he served on a lot of boards for Indigenous people. There were all kinds of representation but he was the fairest of the Native group. They would talk to him the most because he was light skinned. And this was a group of educated . . . you know . . . board-member type Native Americans, and because he was light skinned and spoke English a certain way . . . they just assumed that he was their leader. I just don’t think that this type of stuff will necessarily go away, but he did not admit that he was not the leader.

Consciously or not, this faculty member participated in privileging whiteness by allowing himself to be viewed as more white and not the stereotype of an American Indian (poor language skills, brown complexion, less educated,
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etc.). While others on the board allowed this to happen by bowing to this faculty member’s racial and cultural capital, the faculty member could have done more to intervene in these racially privileging micro processes.

Another example is a fair-complexioned participant from northern New Mexico, Amy, who understood the advantages of “whiteness” and how her mixed-race identity choice could determine her social status. “I was always taught to be proud of who I was. So, maybe I even had a sense of, like, superiority . . . ’cause I’m Spanish, Native and white. ’Cause I guess they [whites] seem to have a sense of superiority.” Although Amy acknowledges a mixed ancestry, her claim to whiteness has left her with the realization that she has a sense of racial superiority over those who have no claim to whiteness. This is not simply a personal issue for individuals like Amy. Claiming whiteness to gain advantage over others happens at a structural level and is, of course, nothing new. Self-labeling in New Mexico stems from relatively higher-status people wanting to be considered more Spanish than Mexican—that is, closer to white. Many have embraced the term Hispanic as a signifier that references a mostly European, or white, ancestry. The concept of “Hispanicness” is a group boundary marker that has been drawn, and it creates conflict between those who align their heritage with the people of Latin America rather than Spain—that is, Latino versus Hispanic. Less frequently, “some refuse both terms because both deny Indian ancestry” (Anzaldúa 1999).

However, not everyone who claims Hispanic identity will do so consistently, which makes identity choice for some mixed-race students provisional and negotiable at Cliff View. Anthony explains, “Well, in Hawaii when I was going to school there, uhm . . . I always . . . I know I was Hispanic because my dad told me to be proud of it. But whenever I’d tell people, they’d say, ‘Oh, you’re from Mexico.’ People don’t understand that difference between Hispanics and Mexican . . . ’cause there is a very big . . . very big difference. . . . They always assume that I am white . . . always.” The “one-drop rule” never applied to “Hispanicness”; instead class, race, and social status were the mixed complexities that were at play. But for New Mexican Hispanics with Native American heritage, the use of Hispanic versus mestizo suggests group alignment with Spanish lineage and a denouncement of, or at least a distancing from, American Indian heritage. As Anthony reasserts his identity as “Hispanic,” he is working to lower the status of “Mexican,” since it is understood to be less valued than Spanish heritage.
To further assert the comparison of Mexicanness versus Hispanicness in northern New Mexico, Amy, a light-skinned person of Spanish, American Indian, and white mixedness describes a point of view of Mexicanness.

My best friend through junior high and high school was a boy named Tino. He was Mexican. He’s very gangsterish, kinda thuggish . . . like “Don’t tell me I’m Mexican [laughs] or I’ll kick your ass.” But he really was my best friend. He’s a good guy for the most part. Hmm . . . we went all the way through together . . . all the way from like second grade to our senior year. But he would be so hurt if the Mexicans called him Mexican and he would be like, “I’m not Mexican!” But he clearly was Mexican . . . very dark skinned, short . . . you know he was. But he always says he was Spanish [laughs]. Like, I’m sorry, but Spanish people don’t look like that.

By stating “Spanish people don’t look like that,” Amy is asserting and assigning a racial label, namely, that to be Mexican is to be phenotypically more American Indian. Thus, claiming Hispanic or Spanish identity is a way to mark boundaries and claim social distance above those who are less European and more Indigenous, in a racial sense. Since New Mexican Spanish identity has been constructed in conjunction with the need for high-status colonizers to attain and maintain whiteness and strict group memberships, this further highlights how one’s identity choice is connected to the denigration of certain raced groups.

Just as blood has become a signifier for American Indian racial and cultural identity, as a nonwhite group identifying as white, or mostly white, the category of Hispanics prompts a resurgence of a racial ideology discourse that further embraces certain races as having material wealth and higher social position. It is also worth noting that not all Hispanics have access to the advantages of identifying as white. However, since there is a large group that identifies as white and Hispanic in New Mexico, this can be seen as a lens to expand the boundaries of “whiteness” for certain groups or members within a certain group, while continuing to disenfranchise other nonwhite raced groups.

Advantages and Disadvantages: Mixed-Race Identity Choice

The disadvantages of being mixed race were easy to identify as the interviews and group sessions provided more information about family racial and cultural
backgrounds and the influence of outside perceptions on students’ daily experiences. Moreover, while some of the participants described how appearing white was a disadvantage, others detailed how appearing black resulted in more extensive social exclusion. Kathy felt her blackness has allowed her to see a lot more problems than other mixed-race people on campus. She viewed her experience as a mixed-race person at Cliff View to be negative. “I feel that being mixed race is a disadvantage. I know I shouldn’t say it, but that’s the truth. Having heritages that contradict or are at odds with each other is an emotional and psychological mind game. Being a part of this and a part of that often leads a person to feel as if they are not really a member of anything. Divided loyalties and worldviews get in the way of being settled and balanced as a person. That is my experience.” Tony saw his mixed-race background as providing a perspective of tense and confusing racial situations.

You know . . . I always get the look. “What are you?” But most of the time people say things around me that are just crazy without even knowing my background. Having close relatives that could pass as white and my mother . . . I see it from all sides. Most people automatically assume I’m African American, but when they look at me up close . . . they look at my hair, and then you can imagine the questions going through their mind. And then my kids . . . they are half Dine and then they are really confused because they speak their traditional language. We get the looks, the stares . . . even on the reservation. My kids shouldn’t have to experience that . . . it’s crazy.

Both Kathy and Tony are “the same but different.” As black-identified mixed-race people, they acknowledged that there was an obvious difference in how they are perceived on campus when compared to nonblack mixed-race people. Tony says,

On campus or in class or anywhere, white is still viewed as being some sort of access. And to be mixed with white and have obvious white features . . . then they will have a different experience versus me. Hey, people off the bat because I’m brown say, “He must be African American but he doesn’t quite fit the part.” And in class, I’m often just totally disregarded, but a person that I know is mixed . . . it’s obvious they are of mixed background and with white heritage . . . their input in class seems more important. It’s as if it’s okay for them to participate in the discussion but I don’t fit the part . . . too non-Native looking.
Tony’s experiences further support how blackness within a classroom setting at Cliff View College is viewed as having no inroad to “some sort of access” to an American Indian group association. Also, Tony’s contributions to class discussions are viewed as being inauthentic based on his particular form of black-associated mixedness and phenotypic appearance.

Kathy has experienced a similar form of boundary demarcation. In her case, it arose in relation to her art. She describes how her blackness is used to exclude her from being seen as a legitimate producer of American Indian art.

On this campus, there are few opportunities to practice and learn traditional arts. And most of my artwork and projects are engulfed in traditional arts . . . especially my beadwork. But because the information on my work states “non-enrolled tribal member of Eastern Band of Cherokees,” people kind of question my knowledge and my connection to my Native American heritage. They obviously do not treat those that are mixed with white or appear phenotypically white the same . . . there is a different level of treatment. It has been hard being here because of the . . . disconnect and knowing that people do question me, but . . . my personality . . . keeps them at bay. They just don’t know what I might say if they come across as just being ignorant. White mixed-race students on this campus are mostly not questioned as us brown mixed-race students. It’s something that they need to address and openly have a dialogue about on campus. But so many people have been mistreated and shut down based on having an opinion that most students just deal with it.

Based on the 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act, Kathy cannot produce for profit traditional art labeled as American Indian because she is not enrolled in a American Indian tribe. The issue of being an unenrolled tribal member places her in a status of being inauthentic in regard to her Indianness. But the larger picture is how a black mixedness has less value at Cliff View College than white mixedness. The value of whiteness as a symbolic factor of race is an inroad for the acceptance of artwork as American Indian if it is produced by mixed-race students with white and phenotypically light complexions. Black mixed-race participants such as Kathy and Tony are grouped as outsiders solely because they lack the phenotypic traits associated with an insider membership. As a result, their artwork is not viewed as legitimate American Indian art.
The oppressive structures that are at play are the social and political influences of being raced and how society has made whiteness a valuable norm. There is a significant racial issue at Cliff View College: Who controls the definition of cultural and traditional art? By and large, white supremacist ideology has determined how one is defined racially, in particular being American Indian through blood quantum. And the absence of discussion as to why lighter-skinned mixed-race students are not questioned about their Indianness to the degree that dark-skinned mixed-race students are opens up the reality that control over what counts as “Native” is as much a problem of “internal” racial politics as anything else. To hone in on the real problem, the issue is not just how to best define a cultural and traditional perspective; it is how to account for the historical and contemporary workings of race when it comes to notions of authenticity.

Moore’s (2006) work supports the findings of this study. Based on her research of mixed-race schooling experiences, she asserts, “The student participants described how being monoracially labeled by others and categorized into a monoracial identity affected how students felt in school and how they defined themselves” (122). This means that mixed-race with black individuals are often forced to live within color boundaries created by the social construction of race. They are denied access to a nonblack identity, and thus to higher social status. In turn, a self-image is created by how others categorize them racially. Kathy’s comment that “white mixed-race students on this campus are mostly not questioned as us brown mixed-race students” substantiates the color boundaries of the social and political race structures at Cliff View College.

Stacey, being a white/American Indian mixed-race person, was the only nonblack/American Indian mixed-race participant who viewed being mixed race as a disadvantage. Her feelings had a lot to do with her experiences with her father’s family. “On my dad’s side of the family I don’t really feel accepted because, like . . . you know, they’re white and you know, they like pick on us. I don’t feel accepted by them. Awkward . . . it’s an uncomfortable feeling around them. So it’s hard like when you are mixed with different races and you want to be proud of all of them. But like when they aren’t nice to you . . . you feel bad that you are a part of them.” Stacey makes clear the pain of being denied acceptance based on phenotypic appearances by the gatekeepers of group membership in one’s own family. It seems that Stacey’s
whiteness was not enough for her father’s family, thus drawing distinctions between notions of “pure” and “tainted” whiteness.

Overall, most of the disadvantages described by the study participants in both groups occurred in relation to a person’s skin tone. Similarly, the advantages described below occurred in the context of race-based colorism. Students, when asked about the benefits of being mixed race, answered almost unilaterally that they saw issues from many perspectives. Many of the participants expressed some sort of pride in being mixed race. They also believed that their mixedness gave them an ability to experience different group associations and appreciate other viewpoints. Amy and Anthony had similar outlooks on their mixedness. Amy felt her mixed-race status has been “a great opportunity to become well rounded in different cultures and just be me.” Anthony cited his mixed-race identity as “an advantage because I feel like I get a unique perspective from different cultural groups, which is a beautiful thing.” And he felt his mixed-race background provided him with a unique position. “People often just assume that I am white, but I’m Hispanic. But because I look white, I’m often judged different from the rest of my friends who look Native or Hispanic. I just feel coming from a background of different cultures versus just one . . . I have more to be proud of, and since I have been coming to this campus . . . it’s definitely a big part to know your culture.”

Anthony’s perspective ignores the racial reality of privilege associated with phenotypically “looking white.” His view that being “mixed” is a chance to float freely between and among various groups stands in stark contrast to those in this study who have been denied such an option. Lyda (2008) examined the factors that influence mixed-race self-identity, such as how one is perceived by others. Lyda puts into context the affect of phenotypic perceptions: “Phenotype can be both a social facilitator and/or barrier to racial group acceptance and affiliation. And as a result, phenotype can influence a multiracial student’s self-identity, as well as the identity others (particularly monoracial others) project onto them, causing a racial socialization dialectic that can shape multiracial students’ identity” (70). In other words, identity for a mixed-race person seems perpetually trapped in a dialectic between inclusion and exclusion, avowed and ascribed identities, in a system of racial schema. Skin tone often returns race discourse into a discussion based on phenotypic appearance and the realities that constructs for mixed-race people.
Although Logan has a brown complexion and phenotypically appears American Indian, he perceived his mixed-race background as an asset.

You know . . . I have a close tie from both sides . . . Native and white. But I look Native and I’m fully accepted with no problems like some people might have experienced. My white side of the family have never treated me different or made me feel different because of my appearance. So, I’ve always felt like I belong. I can fit in and feel just as comfortable with my white side as much as my Native side. I don’t mind being me and all that comes with me.

In addition, Logan believed his mixed-race background gave him an empathetic perspective on racial tension. He felt he understood the problems of those who identified as American Indian but did not have the phenotypic characteristics that would allow them to be accepted into group membership.

Samantha felt her identity gave her a different lens on “whiteness.” Being mixed-race white and American Indian, she often felt her phenotypic features gave her more of an inroad experience to whiteness than someone who could not pass as white.

Like most of the time . . . people just see me as white. So, I’m not always treated different. In class, they just assume that I’m smarter because of the way I look and speak. I don’t have a problem in that way. I’m proud of my white heritage, too. Living in Farmington, New Mexico . . . it was just different for me than other Natives. No one was really mean to me and I know it’s because often they just peg me as white or look at me as being white. Other Natives had problems but not me . . . so . . . it’s kind of an advantage.

Like Samantha, Amy felt her phenotypic features gave her an advantage living in New Mexico.

A lot of people just think I’m white, but they sure don’t think I’m Mexican [laughs] and definitely not Native. My friends sometimes catch a lot of crap from other people because they are dark. That never happens to me. I wouldn’t want to have to deal with that . . . I never have to deal with that. They just assume because I’m light skinned I’m okay, but if you are dark . . . that’s not okay. Being brown here can sometimes . . . cause problems for you. Look at me . . . I look white . . . so . . . it’s just different for me.
The comments of students who viewed their mixed-race as an advantage—“That never happens to me,” “I’m not always treated different,” or “People just assume I’m white”—meant that they are acknowledging the power structures that position whiteness as a symbol of authority and that place less worth on nonwhite races. Often these structures played out in varying discourses with the students. Their situation becomes problematic when a particular discourse places them in a position of participating in asserting privilege over other nonblack mixed-raced people. This stance provides them with racial prosperity, while simultaneously allowing them to ignore that others will be left to stand alone against racial inequality.

Mixed-race students’ self perceptions were heavily influenced by their lived experiences. Conversations that took place around their elementary and secondary experiences were recounted at the collegiate level. College presented a new setting in which some students participated in negotiating their identity choice, while others were assigned a racial label. In this process most students had a choice about their identity, whereas some students—namely, black/American Indian mixed-race participants—were assigned to one race and accepted a monoracial status as a way to survive at Cliff View. Those students that were assigned to one race—that is, black—experienced alienation from the larger American Indian ethnoracial group association.

Identity for many mixed-raced students began with negotiated assertions, or an ongoing process of assertion and “action-reaction.” Their experiences are multiple and various, filled with many different personal stories and interpretations that often shift based on their evolving process of understanding the social meaning of race.

Notes

1. “Mexican” denotes a person of mixed Spanish and American Indian descent.
2. “Colorism embodies preference and desire for both light skin and as well as these other attendant features. Hair, eye color, and facial features function along with color in complex ways to shape opportunities, norms regarding attractiveness, self-concept, and overall body image” (Thompson and Keith 2001, 338).
3. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act or, informally, the Indian New Deal, was US federal legislation that secured certain rights for American Indians and Alaskan Natives. These included the reversal of the Dawes Act’s privatization of common holdings of American Indians and a
return to local self-government for tribal bases. The act also restored to American Indians the management of their assets (mainly land) and included provisions intended to make sound economic foundations for the inhabitants of Indian reservations.

The Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, also known as the Thomas-Rogers Act, extended the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. It sought to return some form of tribal government to many tribes in formal Indian Territory.

4. “Hispanic” denotes a US citizen of Latin American or Spanish descent. “mestizo” denotes a person of mixed racial ancestry, especially mixed European and American Indian ancestry.

5. The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-644) is a truth-in-advertising law that prohibits misrepresentation in marketing of [American] Indian arts and crafts products within the United States. It is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular [American] Indian or [American] Indian Tribe or [American] Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States. An [American] Indian is defined as a member of any federally or State recognized [American] Indian Tribe, or an individual certified as an [American] Indian artisan by an [American] Indian Tribe.