“MY EXPERIENCE IS JUST ONE”
THE VOICES OF FOUR RACIALIZED WOMEN AT QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY

by

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Dedication

For my family.

Your support makes everything possible.
Abstract

Silence around ideas of racial diversity in public settings has become normative. Colourmuteness allows for the culture of Whiteness to remain unchallenged, and reinforces attitudes of assimilation and tolerance. This culture manifests itself in institutions of higher learning, and positions these places as sites of cultural domination, such as Queen’s University, site of the current study. The purpose of this thesis was to offer insight into the educational experiences of four female self-identified racialized students at Queen’s University. Together these participants contributed their stories about their thoughts, motivations, and experiences at Queen’s University, and their experiences as members of the student body. The inductive process was used as an analytical framework to allow the experiences of the participants to be the main focus of the work, and the voices of the participants were used as a guide for analysis.

Results of this study indicated that the exploration of identity is a complex and layered phenomenon, and that interrelations between different aspects of identity make categorization of individual experience problematic. Each participant presented her personal story of her experiences as a racialized student within the Queen’s context, and together these stories revealed a need for open dialogue around constructions of difference, rather than a silencing of diversity.

*Keywords: racialized, colourmute, colourblind, Whiteness, Queen’s University*
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My parents are immigrants from India, who moved to Canada long before I was born. My father completed most of his formal education in Quebec, and my mother moved to Canada soon after completing her undergraduate degree, pursuing her postgraduate education in Ontario. Although we moved around frequently during my formative years, I grew up in Canada, and consider myself to be Canadian. Through my parents, I was privileged to have access to another rich cultural tradition that I could call my own. Growing up, my brothers and I bridged many worlds—the Punjabi world of my parents and extended family, where we would eat delicious Indian foods, celebrate Baisakhi\(^1\) at the Gurdwara\(^2\), and wear beautiful Indian-style clothing. My skin colour, linguistic knowledge, and the values with which my parents raised me allowed me to successfully navigate this ethno-cultural world and its customs.

In this same manner, I was also Canadian. It was the country of my birth, where I lived, and where I was educated, and outside of my extended family, all of my friends were either kids who lived in my neighborhood or children with whom I went to school. I spoke English, and in fact to this day it is the only language in which I am completely fluent. My dad taught me how to ride a bike, my mom and I would go on school field trips, I celebrated birthdays at McDonald’s—I was a typical Canadian kid, and in the dark, you would not have known that I was any different from anyone else when I was growing up.

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\(^{1}\) The most significant holiday in the Sikh calendar, commemorating the founding of the religion.
\(^{2}\) The Sikh place of worship.
In my classes at school, I was usually one of the few children from a visible minority group. My peers, teachers, and the communities in which I grew up were predominantly White, and the curriculum from which I was taught reflected this dominant culture. As a racialized female student, I had to negotiate my own identity between the dominant Canadian culture into which I was born, and the culture of my parents at home. As I have grown up and moved into the post-secondary context, those classroom populations that were once mostly homogeneous now reflect more of a visible diversity that is still not matched by educators or the curriculum. The educators are still overwhelmingly White, and do not have knowledge or experiences as to what it means to be a racialized other, or the challenges that racialized students face attempting to negotiate assumptions of perceived difference. Just because I look different from most of the population, doesn’t mean that I am different. I may have access to specialized cultural knowledge through my parents and my upbringing, but I don’t consider myself to be Indian because I was not born in India. It should be as simple as that, but I have found that is not the case.

Dominant Eurocentric attitudes are still prevalent in Canadian society, especially within our institutions of higher learning. For me, this fact was underscored when I started my studies at Queen’s, and everywhere I looked, not only were most of the students White, but just being on campus made me feel like a minority in ways I couldn’t articulate. At my undergraduate university, I had not felt this way, and I was not sure if this was an experience unique to Queen’s, or to me as an individual. In interactions with peers on campus, certain assumptions would come up, such as my alleged love for spicy food. While no one addressed the colour of my skin directly, the ways in which it was
addressed implicitly put me on the defensive. Just because I had brown skin did not make me any more or less likely to like spicy food! When the issue of my skin colour was mentioned, it was often to tell me that I could pass as a member of another racial group. I have been told many times that I could pass for Spanish, but is it a good thing that people are telling me that I could present myself to be something that I am not? Why was the discussion not centered around what I am perceived to be, what I inherited from my parents?

It was when I started the research for my Master’s thesis that I could put a name to this phenomenon: colourmuteness. If the colour of my skin wasn’t talked about, then everything about me was the same as everyone else. But everything about me is not the same as everyone else. We each have unique personal histories that make us who we are, and it is our experiences that create our individual identities. The experience of having a darker skin tone than most people I come into contact with on a daily basis is just one of the things that makes me who I am. I became interested in exploring if other women of colour, who were also students at Queen’s University, felt the same way. I wanted to discover how they felt they negotiated their identities at Queen’s, and if they found the process to be as complex and as layered as myself. The post-secondary context is already challenging enough, and according to Audrey Kobayashi (2007), a professor at Queen's, “the university has long been, and remains, a zone of White privilege” (p. 60). How then do racialized people fit in?
**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding on how four self-identified racialized female students felt they negotiated and expressed their identity within a White-dominant post-secondary context. To explore their perspectives, I undertook a study consisting of individual interviews with four female self-identified racialized students from Queen’s University, the site of this research study. Through the lens of my participants’ experiences, I explored issues around school choice; culture at Queen’s University; inclusiveness at the university; and if participants felt that they experienced any barriers or constraints to the expression of their identities within the social and institutional space of the university.

One central research question guided this study: How do self-identified racialized female students negotiate their identities and understand themselves within the White-dominant post-secondary setting at Queen’s University? To answer this question, I interviewed four female racialized students, to hear about their perspectives, feelings, and understandings of how they felt they negotiated their identity within the Queen’s context.

**Key Terms**

Some of the key terms that drove this research were racialized students, White/White-dominant, and identity. Racialized students can include people who “might experience differential treatment on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, religion, or culture” (University of Guelph Statement on Equality). These same groups have also been known as visible minorities, but I felt that the term racialized was more inclusive and had fewer power associations. The racialized students in my study self-identified as
racialized, which avoided power connotations that could have been present had an external figure, such as myself, declared individuals to be racialized, individuals who did not *themselves* identify as racialized. An example of such a power connotation can be seen among census takers, who used to indicate racial identity on the census based on what they perceived to be the respondent’s racial identity; it is only in recent years that persons have been asked to self-identify (Alcoff, 2006). It is, admittedly, problematic to use the term “racialized” only to refer to persons who are non-White, in that it gives the impression that White people do not have a race. However, “racialized” is the best current means of describing people who are non-White.

In the present study, the term “White or White-dominant” was used to reflect the “power and privilege accorded people who are identified as White, regardless of their continent of origin” (Ramsey, 2004, p. 13; capitals in original). This culture is not just perpetuated by those who identify as White; “non-white people can live in, operate under and sometimes perpetuate the culture of whiteness too” (Er-Chua, 2010). The construct of Whiteness is problematic because there is no specific definition or circumstance that can be declared to be White; instead it is the perceptions of the participants within a particular group or setting that creates “a culture of Whiteness.” Finally, according to Taylor (1994), identity was defined as my participant’s understanding of who they were, and their fundamental defining characteristics as human beings. It was this self-perception that was used in this study.
Contextual Background

Queen’s University is a mid-sized university located in Kingston, Ontario. Founded in 1841, the school has a rich history, replete with Scottish traditions. It is considered to be a strongly academic university\(^3\), but like many post-secondary institutions in North America, it is still “struggling to overcome entrenched cultural beliefs…that preserve the continued dominance of Whiteness” (Henry, 2006, p. 39). The Barry Report, also known as the Final Report by the Principal’s Advisory Committee on Race Relations, as well as the commissioned study on the campus environment conducted by Frances Henry between 2002-2003, paint a picture of a campus that has problems with racism and with accepting diversity. Admittedly, the Henry Report (2006) is not unchallenged, as methodological concerns have been raised about the manner in which the study was conducted. Most recently the problem has centered on the retention and inclusion of racialized faculty, but this campus culture also extends to the experiences of racialized students and their continued marginalization. In 2005, a Queen’s student caused controversy appearing in blackface as a Halloween costume, which sparked outrage on campus, prompting one student of African heritage to comment that it spoke “to what we tolerate and what we accept and what we maintain here at Queen’s University” (Macmillan, 2005).

The Henry Report was released in 2006, and provided the results and recommendations of a study undertaken on the experiences of racialized faculty members at Queen’s University. The report concluded that:

White privilege and power continues to be reflected.... It is reflected in the everyday interactions between minority faculty and their White students, who challenge their expertise, authority and competence. It is manifested in the

\(^3\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen%27s_University
normative discourses of colleagues, hiring and tenure committees, University administrators, who commonly employ the discourses of reverse discrimination, loss of meritocracy, political correctness, colour-blindness, neutrality, and freedom of expression - all of which act as a cover for the persistence of racial bias and differential treatment. The findings of this study… suggest that the vision of a more just, equitable and inclusive institution remains largely unrealized. While there are some signs of positive change, the scope and pace remain glacially slow. (p. 167)

In the years following the report, the racial climate on campus is still highly charged. Headlines in the Queen’s Journal, the campus newspaper, read “Diversity at Queen’s: Society has to ask ‘uncomfortable questions’ to become more multicultural” (Paperny, 2006); “Confronting a culture of silence: Queen’s made headline two years ago for its ‘whiteness.’ Has anything changed since then?” (Macdonald & Woods, 2008). Posters for a popular anti-poverty campaign were defaced with racist slogans signed by a White supremacist group, which is known to operate on campus (www.racetoeducate.net). The cultural climate at Queen’s is considered to be one that reinforces the concept of White privilege, which is a major reason why I have chosen to situate my study in this context.

**Rationale**

Race is not something that has a biological basis, but rather is a socially constructed and reinforced concept (Banks, 2008; Gay, 2000; Ramsey, 2004). Perceptions of race and difference are “rooted in economic, political, and historical power relationships” that have their foundations in the Enlightenment (Ramsey, 2004, p. 6). It is these assumptions that create many of the issues surrounding a lack of inclusion in the post-secondary context. Children grow up being told that all people are created equal, which is substantiated by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, but, in their
daily experiences, children can see that some groups are more privileged than others, and that racism is what lies at the core of “national identity, and has established a pattern of…marginalization that has been played out…against immigrants [and] women” (Ramsey 2004, p. 6). Theories on the construction of knowledge imply that reality is constructed in such a way so as to legitimize the knowledge and culture of the dominant group (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). People of Asian, African, and Latin American descent suffer discrimination in all areas of their lives, in contrast to those who are racially constructed as White (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ramsey, 2004). Issues around diversity become politically charged—because they involve power relations among different groups who are in conflict about what constitutes democratic ideals of equal and just participation by all.

Despite a clear lack of biological evidence for race and documents that claim that all are equal in society, the issue of race is “real for those who are targets and perpetrators of racism in its many overt and covert forms” (Ramsey, 2004, p. 70). Difference becomes a comparative term, fraught with relational and creative connotations, and, through these processes of othering, difference implies a deviation from that construed as the norm. It is the fear of this difference that is a stumbling block to understanding because it “creates barriers and also puts the onus on those who are different to cross the distance between their realities and the dominant consciousness, while those who represent the norm avoid their responsibility” (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 26). The different ways that we have of organizing people stand for hierarchies, rather than differences, and those who are different are categorized as such by the dominant group, and the relational equation becomes one of power and domination. By remaining invisible, White is not seen as
being a racial identity (Ramsey); the socially dominant group remains outsider to the
creation of these hierarchies, and hence is divorced from the politics of difference
(Banks, 2006; Ghosh & Abdi). According to the Queen’s University Student Applicant
Equity Census, the percentage of “visible minority” students registered in 2008 was
approximately 25%, in keeping with national averages, and there are issues with
incorporating students and faculty of racialized backgrounds (Er-Chua, 2007).

North Americans are living in a time that is marked by rapid changes in society,
and there are shifts in meaning as to what it means to belong to particular groups. People
have come to Canada due to many circumstances, and the history of many is complex and
filled with stories of hardship and loss (Ramsey, 2004). Some groups that have emigrated
have enjoyed greater success and acceptance into society than others, and the lines of
disadvantage seem to be such that “those who look the most different from Anglo-Saxon
settlers [have] been the most marginalized” (Ramsey, p. 70). As different cultural and
ethnic groups come into contact, more children have multicultural/multiracial
backgrounds, which incorporate a multiplicity of traditions and values (Ramsey; Renn,
2003). Roles and values of people within society have also changed, as groups evolve and
their members absorb or resist the influences of other cultures (Ramsey). As a result,
there are few people who identify themselves as exclusively belonging to any one
cultural or ethnic group (Ramsey), and yet we as a society still feel the need to organize
people into discrete groups based on perceptions of race and gender (Renn, 2003). This
underlying organizational assumption does little to impact the status quo of racialized
groups within institutionalized spaces (Castagno, 2008; Renn, 2003), such as the post-
secondary context at Queen’s University, described as White-dominant (Henry, 2006).
The post-secondary context may function as a site of White-centered cultural domination, and become a space that acts to erode the cultural differences and traditional knowledge that racialized students often bring to their daily exchanges (Banks, 2006; Castagno, 2008; Ramsey, 2004). It is not about acknowledging and celebrating difference in students—instead the post-secondary space articulates sameness and lack of diversity. “Words are avoided, because they are infused with personal blame and guilt, and as a result the words become taboo” (Castagno, 2008, p. 319). The present study articulates and gives voice to issues of diversity that may not always be addressed within the Queen’s context, thereby putting a spotlight on identity and difference, rather than reinforcing constructions of silence and assimilation.

**Overview of the Thesis**

In the first chapter, I introduced the topic of the thesis, and outlined the context and purpose of the study. In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature that is organized by the different aspects of identity—personal identity, social identity, and situational identity. As my study looks specifically at racialized students, I also include a section on the construction of race within my literature review. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology that was used to conduct the present study, including a discussion of my analytical framework. Chapter 4 presents the results of my discussions with each of my participants. In my final chapter, I connect my research findings with previous literature, reflect on the course of my study, and present some of the limitations that I encountered in the course of my research and ways to alleviate them in future research. I conclude this thesis by providing some suggestions for future practice alongside my final thoughts.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

“The identity of an individual... is meaningful only when it is expressed in relation to other individuals or other groups... therefore the identity of being is always a relative quality, even circumstantial, for defining it demands a selection... of the sociological characteristics of the being in question” (Cabral, 1973, p. 79).

Identity is the meaning that is attached to an individual, and like all meanings, is socially constructed, maintained, and transformed. According to Blumer (1969), there are three types of identity: personal identity, social identity, and situational identity. In this chapter, I examine the concept of identity, and how the three areas of identity suggested by Blumer both relate to and problematize identity construction for racialized female students within White-dominant educational settings.

What is Identity?

This study defined identity as an individual’s awareness of the self, his or her self-concept of who she or he is, both as an individual and through group affiliations (Buechler, 2008). Group affiliations can include one’s national or cultural identity. A significant portion of self-concept comes from the gender of an individual, as gender identity directly impacts how an individual views her or himself as a singular entity, as well as in relation to other people and groups (Alcoff, 2006). Race is an equally significant aspect of identity, and alongside gender, operates as a form of social identity that is “fundamental, rather than peripheral to the self” (Alcoff, p. 6). Race and gender function through visual cues found on the body, and, although there are instances in
which these cues may seem ambiguous, both come with embedded meanings that are constructed by the social space occupied by an individual.

While gender and race have long been studied as separate entities, they are not independent or exclusive of one another. The construction of gender is “an analytic concept that refers to socially constructed meanings, relationships, and identities organized around reproductive difference” (Glenn, 1999, p. 5). The viewpoints of different groups affect how knowledge and culture are produced, and one’s gender and race are important standpoints in these considerations. The intersectionality of race and gender ensure that the experience of one directly influences the experience of the other. Constructions of gender are not biological as much as they are social and rooted firmly in one’s race (Glenn, 1999). One’s identity as a woman is different based on how she is constructed racially. Women of colour experience their race and gender as “simultaneous and linked” aspects of their identity (Glenn, 1999, p. 4).

An Indian woman has a different identity than a Black woman, and a Black woman experiences her identity differently than a White woman. All of these racial constructions are social and contextual, but fundamentally the experiences of all these different women are directly linked to their gender and their race. Race and gender are fundamental to how an individual experiences the self. It is not possible to have an understanding of race without understanding gender, and vice versa (Ferre, Lorber, & Hess, 1999). Gender and race are significant social forces, and involve cultural meanings that cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the ethnocultural context in which they are found (Ferre et al.; Glenn, 1999).
There is great diversity when looking at issues of identity construction and the process of identity formation. For racialized individuals, there is an added layer to the construction of their identity. Racial identity is socially constructed through visible markers found on the body, primarily skin colour (Alcoff, 2006), and such constructions are relational and contextual. According to Alcoff, the processes by which we notice differences in others are insignificant when taken on their own: “skin tone, hair colour and texture, shape of facial features” (p. 199).

Types of Identity

Personal identity.

Personal identity is an individual’s story about her or himself (Buechler, 2008). Personal identity distinguishes one individual from others who may occupy the same positions or situations. Personal identity comes from one’s accumulated biography, and is shaped by one’s social and situational identities. It is not a static entity; rather it is being shaped and moulded in a continuous process that is influenced over an individual’s lifespan.

Familial influences.

Personal identity is affected by an individual’s primary groups, which, for most people, initially consist of immediate family members or others who are regarded as family (Buechler, 2008). Being exposed to and immersed within these groups is one of the first experiences in an individual’s personal story, and is one of the first influences on identity. Buechler views these groups as being “the first and most important social group through which most… are socialized and develop a sense of self and individuality” (p.
Persons’ self-concepts are closely linked to their parents and family influences to which they are exposed in their childhoods (Spencer, 1999) with individuals being inseparable from their relationships with other people (Buechler).

Primary groups are the central identifiers to an individual’s self-concept and identity. One’s involvement with primary groups is “on-going, all-inclusive, and central to [one's] sense of self,” and provides individuals with “intimate, face-to-face interactions” (Buechler, 2008, p. 181). The family group always remains at the core of an individual’s primary group, and is the biggest socializing influence upon an individual, especially within a diverse cultural context. One’s sense of self is tied to one’s primary group, and these are crucial reference groups, which individuals use as benchmarks to judge who they are, what they do, how they act, and through which they seek validation (Buechler). Familial primary groups hence serve to provide attitudes, beliefs, and values that are considered to be a significant factor in shaping an individual’s identity (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001).

**Ethno-racial influences.**

For racialized individuals, the ethnicity of their primary group serves as the most significant identifier throughout their life course (Kalsi, 2003; Rosenthal, 1987). Raced and gendered identities are socially produced (Alcoff, 2006), and are established through the expressed ethnicity of individuals’ family groups, but are also shaped through membership within a specific group, distinct from larger society. These identities are fundamental in shaping our personal selves (Alcoff) and are socially constructed. Such identities are relational and contextual, and the self does not exist until it is manifest through these processes. For racialized individuals within White-dominant cultural
contexts, it is only through construction of the self as other that the individual gains recognition (Alcoff). For individuals from immigrant backgrounds, the issue of ethnic identity is an interesting one, as not only are they exposed to the ethnicity of their parents when at home, but also by the values and attitudes that are expressed by their peers (Phinney et al., 2001). Throughout their lives, the self-concept and self-image of racialized individuals are shaped by their encounters with others in culturally diverse settings (Spencer, 1999). Race is constructed in a dynamic progression, which is influenced by those within our primary groups and society in general, most often using skin colour as a basis for organization (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999).

Individuals are positioned by their race just as they are positioned by their gender. Using race as an organizational tool means that individuals have differential access to things, and differential controls. Racial identities become activated when individuals are immersed within their racial group, and experience a “transfer of racial self through that immersion” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 42). These identities are then contextually expressed by how persons are seen by those around them. The issue of representation is a problematic one—when looking at Black identity you are most likely to “see images of black people that reinforce...white supremacy... These images are constructed by White and Black people through processes of internalized racism” (hooks, 1992, p. 1). The site of representation remains a struggle for racialized individuals, as hegemonic modes of thinking are reproduced within “white educational systems by a racist mass media” (hooks, p. 2). Taking action and transformation to break free of this paradigm becomes surrounded by issues of standpoint—how do racialized individuals step outside, and from what perspective do they see the world, create the world, and take action (hooks).
To answer some of these questions, racialized individuals need to become reflexive and reflective actors in shaping their personal narratives. To understand the self, one needs to understand one’s identity, and racialized individuals are seen as having a greater interest in searching out their racial identities. In contrast to those who are constructed as White, racialized people want to know about the role that their racial identity plays in their life (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). When discussing the subject of her race, and how the perceptions of those around her impacted her personal identity, Patricia Williams, a female Black law professor at the University of Wisconsin, wrote:

I felt myself slip in and out of shadow, as I became nonblack for purposes of inclusion and black for purposes of exclusion; I felt the boundaries of my very body manipulated…the paradox of my being black yet nonblack visited me again when…[people] wondered aloud if I “really identified as black”…. I was acutely aware that the choice of identifying as black (as opposed to white?) was hardly mine; that as long as I am identified as black by the majority of others, my own identity as black will surely follow as a simple fact of human interdependency. (1991, p. 10)

Williams discusses the construction of her race as something external, a kind of lived subjectivity that is experienced (Alcoff, 2006). This subjectivity “is not always perfectly mapped onto our socially perceived self” (Alcoff, p. 93), and her understanding of herself and the experience of being that self became something that was assigned to her by those around her, who perceived her as black or nonblack. This same paradox is faced by racialized students from other backgrounds, as their racial identity can be manipulated to be used for the purposes of inclusion or exclusion. Race becomes subjected to a liminal space, to be activated or deactivated for use by correspondence to one’s interior and exterior self. Racialized persons come to regard race as something that is only to be articulated at certain times. This construction of race becomes part of their personal biography, and race becomes seen as being only one aspect of the self, rather than as
something that is fundamental to their self-concept. Being a racialized individual becomes problematized for students, as focusing on their race as an aspect of identity is seen as being counter to wanting to fit in with the dominant culture.

The only culture that can be promoted within this context is the culture of Whiteness, as it is the only culture that is perceived to be not about pointing out differences, but rather about celebrating sameness (Castagno, 2008). Issues around race become silenced in such a framework, and behaviours that are linked to the dominant cultural group within society are privileged by society over those forms that may be linked to minority groups (Banks & Banks, 2004; Gay, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In Western contexts, the individual is prized over the group, and collective behaviours are discouraged over those that place the individual first. Colloquial sayings that exemplify these attitudes are “survival of the fittest” and “every man for himself.” These attitudes marginalize the raced other who may display different culture forms that are seen as being different. By remaining invisible, Whiteness is not seen as being a racial identity, and hence the dominant group remains “outside the hierarchy of social relations, in a way that is not part of the politics of difference” (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 28). The notions of racial privilege allow those who identify as White to pretend to be ‘colourblind’ but pretending not to see colour “makes no sense unless being of different colors is somehow shameful” (Thompson, 1998, p. 524). Alcoff (2006) raises a similar point—“while the rest of us continue to see colour, [those constructed as White] declare themselves to be colourblind, to not notice whether people are black, white, green or purple” (p. 205).
Research on personal identity.

To challenge these constructions, we have to step back from the world as we see it, and attempt to identify how our perceptions are created through language, culture, and embedded notions of power, and ask questions about how these assumptions were constructed (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Ramsey, 2004). We are unique, and each of us has a history of experiences through which we create and shape our worldviews. Society in North America is seen as being a level field, in which anyone can accomplish anything if he or she works hard enough.

In the Canadian academic context, racialized students may come from immigrant backgrounds, a fact that adds a cross-cultural dimension to their personal biographies and how they experience and construct their identities. They have complicated and layered personal identities, as these individuals or their family groups may “maintain family links across borders, bridging homeplaces in two very different cultural worlds” (Blume & De Reus, 2009, p. 71).

Although there are theorists who discuss the impact of family groups on personal identity among racialized individuals (e.g., Deaux, 1993; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Jones & McEwen, 2000), there is little empirical research carried out directly in this area, and even less that specifically examines the influences of primary family groups among post-secondary students. A study from the United States conducted by Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang (2001) investigated issues of adaptation into the American context in adolescent youth from immigrant backgrounds. The study sampled families from three immigrant groups—Vietnamese, Mexican, and Armenian. Participants in the study completed measures of native language proficiency, social interaction with like-peers,
and ethnic identity. Parents of participants completed a measure that was intended to assess their support for cultural maintenance. The researchers found that the construction of identity among youth in the study involved “both the culture of origin and the culture of the new country” (p. 135). Youth were socialized and raised by parents who retained the values and customs from their country of origin. Children brought up in these families faced conflicting tensions—at home they were faced with one set of traditions and customs while they themselves had gone through a school system that stressed customs of the United States. Despite the pull from the mainstream American culture on their children and regardless of their ethnic group affiliation, immigrant parents had a significant impact on their children’s sense of ethnicity and the degree to which the children experienced in-group peer interactions.

The same researchers also found that native language acquisition was a significant contributor to the ethnic identity of participating youth although knowledge of the mother tongue was not a requirement for group ethnic identity. Acquisition of native languages is viewed as something discouraged by the American context, with knowledge of English being seen as key for the integration and assimilation of immigrants and their children into society at large. The American school system also places a great degree of emphasis on English proficiency. Immigrant groups that have sought to retain ties with their homelands, cultural traditions, and languages have often been met with negative attitudes from those within the dominant American culture (Phinney et. al., 2001).

Due to differences among the groups, the study’s researchers created separate models to use with each of the ethnic groups represented in the study. The results that were reported in the study from each of the groups exhibited the same strength of
relationship, despite the use of different models. One of the key limitations from this study was that the researchers failed to distinguish ethnic identity from racial or national identity, or even to address that there might be areas of overlap or confusion across these other identities. The participants in the study were separated by their country of origin, but no mention was made of variation within the groups in terms of language, religion, socio-economic status, and other identifiers that might indicate variability within the groups, only between groups. The researchers also discussed how the results reported in the study were correlational, and that the models that they used did not indicate causality, nor did they indicate the direction of the effect that was reported.

This research is relevant to the present study because it examines how family influences identity, and evaluates how cultural markers such as native language acquisition play a role in developing ethnic identity. This study also addresses the current research as it explores family group influence on identity among racialized students, and is one of the only empirical studies to address this area, although Renn, in her 2000 research on the influences of peer groups on the identity formation of racialized students in the post-secondary context, also has a brief discussion on this issue. In her study, Renn found that, in her participants' narratives about life before college, they all described times of belonging to a family community, or group, and mentioned that these experiences had helped to shape them and their identities.

**Social identity.**

As an individual’s self develops and begins to grow, he or she ventures away from his or her initial familial primary group and forms other groups. When individuals begin school, they become members of secondary groups comprised of other students.
Over time and as relationships develop, one’s secondary group may progress into another primary group. In adolescence, peer groups have a tendency to become more significant and intimate than family groups as youths may feel that their parents just don’t understand them (Buechler, 2008). Throughout their lives, individuals’ relationships with those around them consist of an ongoing interplay between primary and secondary groups (Buechler).

**Social influences.**

Identities are constructed within a social framework, and an individual’s identity is constantly shifting and in a process of renegotiation (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Social identities are created when individuals occupy spaces within social structures; identities grounded upon race, social status, gender, religion, or sexual identity are examples of social identities (Buechler, 2008). One’s social identity shapes one’s degree of agency within social structures—“differing opportunities emerge from the statuses granted or withheld to these identities” (p. 190). Blumer (1969) states that social identities are more permanent forms of identity because they are almost impossible to renegotiate. All people occupy unique positions within social networks, and it is their positioning within these networks that makes them who they are. Differences amongst individuals arise due to personal experiences. It is these experiences that make one’s membership in social groups unique and distinct (Buechler), resulting in individuality. In these conditions, individuality is not something that is constructed personally but instead is formed at the social level. Social identity is seen as being a part of an individual’s self-concept, which comes from knowledge of membership within a particular social group or groups.
One such socially constructed group would be one that is based around an individual’s race.

**Ethno-racial influences.**

Racial and ethnic identities are socially constructed and reinforced (Alcoff, 2006; Banks & Banks, 2004; Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ramsey, 2004). An individual’s race is seen as being fundamental to the self, and like gender or professional affiliation, functions as an organizational social category used by people to construct meaning from their social worlds (Alcoff; Cheng & Lee, 2009). Unlike other signifiers such as age, which can be surgically masked, race is not something that can be masked easily, and membership in a racial group is almost impossible to conceal (Cheng & Lee). The classification of race has great variance across cultures, and aspects of racial identity that may be significant in some locations may not share this same significance in other locations (Alcoff). Societal interpretations of an individual’s racial identity is thus both local and specific in nature; the social construction of race is “rooted in economic, political, and historical power relationships” that have their foundations in the Enlightenment (Ramsey, 2004, p. 6). Race becomes something that exists in a hierarchy, and under these conditions becomes something that is itself racist (Buechler, 2008). Individuals are taught from a young age not to talk about differences, but rather to embrace those things that make others the same. Williams (1991) gives an excellent example of how this concept is reinforced in childhood.

Walking along Fifth Avenue in New York not long ago, I came up behind a couple and their young son…. The mother was saying, “But why are you afraid of big dogs?” “Because they’re big,” he responded…. “But what is the difference between a big dog and a little dog?” The father persisted. “They’re big,” said the child. “But there is really no difference,” said the mother, pointing to a slathering Wolfhound with the narrow eyes and the calculating amble of a gangster, then to
a beribboned Pekingese the size of a roller skate…. “See?” said the father. “If you look really closely you’ll see that there is no difference at all. They’re all just dogs.”…I use this story…because I think it illustrates a paradigm of thought by which children are taught not to see what they see…. The story also illustrates the possibility of collective perspective or social positioning…a pervasive social phenomenon. (pp. 12-13)

This example illustrates how, from a young age, children growing up in the North American context are taught to verbalize only the things that are the same and ignore differences. When looking at racial constructions, this socialization process creates an environment of colour blindness, as people ignore or do not give voice to constructions of colour. This tendency is problematic for people from racialized backgrounds, since it creates an atmosphere of assimilation and tolerance. Cultural assimilation refers to a process whereby individuals from minority groups within a society are encouraged to adopt cultural norms that are in line with the dominant culture rather than their culture of origin. The different cultural practices of these groups are tolerated (as opposed to truly accepted) by the dominant cultural group, while practices that reflect assimilation are encouraged. These attitudes maintain White dominance within North American contexts. In these conditions, the issue of race becomes casually treated as social fact, but the process of how racial difference is created is barely interrogated. This tolerance ignores the very real issue of competing interpretations of racial categories that may exist within the same society, and reinforces colourmuteness. By teaching avoidance and ignorance, individuals become conditioned to create an atmosphere of assimilation, which is counter-intuitive to concepts of inclusiveness and diversity. Because racialized individuals are a minority within the White-dominant post-secondary context, it is those who are constructed as White who get to decide how and where racialized identities are activated.
Research on social identity.

In their American research on how individuals of colour negotiate their identity in social interactions, Lewis and Bell (2006) found that the role of race was not usually explored within the social context. They constructed the Intersectional Model of Identity (IMI) that addressed individual behaviour, specifically looking at the participation of minority group members within the social context. The model suggests that personal attributes and social group membership overlap as individuals think about these two conceptually distinct constructs. The model was constructed to give researchers insight into the function of identity, and was thereby intended to illuminate the intersection of personal and social identities. By determining the intersections of these identities, researchers would be able to come to a better understanding of how marginalized individuals negotiate these identities as vehicles for the pursuit of social justice.

Similarly, Cokley and Chapman (2008) conducted a study on the roles of ethnic identity, anti-White attitudes, and academic self-concept among African-American students and the impact of the same on student achievement. The researchers were interested in looking at why African-American students were under-achieving compared to their White counterparts within the post-secondary context. They felt that this under-achievement might be due to a perceived relationship between cultural and academic identity, and the school environment of these individuals. The researchers defined cultural identity as attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of individuals towards their socially constructed ethnic group within White-dominant American society. They sampled 274 African-American college students who attended various summer school psychology classes in the summer of 2005 at a historically Black university in Texas. Participants
were asked to answer a questionnaire that utilized the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). The results were analyzed through structural equation modelling software (EQS version 6.1). The researchers found that ethnic identity did not have a direct relationship with grade point average; instead ethnic identity had a “positive relationship with academic self-concept and a negative relationship with devaluing academic success” (p. 360) For this sample of students, the researchers concluded that ethnic identity of the students played an important, albeit indirect, role in academic achievement.

One of the limitations of the study, as identified by the researchers, was that the participants overall did not display strong anti-White attitudes, which was one of the qualities researchers had expected to find in participants with strongly expressed ethnic identities. As well, the students who were sampled were all previously enrolled college students, which already suggests a certain level of academic motivation among the participants. The students also attended a historically Black school, and choosing to attend such a school may indicate a sense of ethnic identity.

This study is relevant to the current research as it samples racialized students within the post-secondary context. The results from this study with regard to ethnic identity as well as school environment for students of colour may provide insight into the experiences of the participants in the current research, and may be used to draw correlations between diverse groups of post-secondary students. The current research is not concerned with participants from a specific ethnic group, however, and as such the current participants likely would offer more diverse attitudes.
A small portion of the 2003 study by Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang investigated the influences of like-peers on ethnic identity. Social interactions in these groups gave students a medium through which they could express their ethnic identity, with these interactions highly related to ethnic identity. The results of this study demonstrated the significance of ethnic peers as contributors to identity of youth from immigrant backgrounds, in that ethnic peers allowed racialized youth a forum for cultural maintenance outside of their family groups.

Collectively, these studies are relevant to the present research as they illustrate the influence and importance of social groups on identity. Although none of the studies that were discussed in this section directly relate to female racialized post-secondary students, they provide a framework on this area of research upon which the present study seeks to expand.

**Situational identity.**

Identity is formed around multiple axes that include notions of gender and social class, which are grounded in social locations. The multiple identities of an individual are not apparent in all contexts. Different forms of identity may be articulated at different times, depending on the reality that is being defined socially by individuals and groups of individuals who serve as the definers of reality (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Situational identities are created when an individual is involved in face-to-face interactions with others, and organizes his or her personal and social identities through context-based behaviours and interpretations of a situation (Buechler, 2008). When an individual is in new contexts or situations, a process of identity negotiation takes place (Lewis & Bell, 2006). Identities created through this process can be repetitive, and may be acquired and
reinforced within particular contexts, such as the academic context (Alcoff, 2006).

Situational identities are the most flexible of the three kinds of identity.

**Situational influences.**

Context-based experiences and accompanying perceptions influence how individuals develop identity, and how they experience a sense of self. Perceptions around the identity of others are also contextually based: learning someone is a mother may trigger specific feelings or expectations within you, either consciously or unconsciously, about how a mother should act or about knowledge she may possess (Alcoff, 2006).

Similarly, ethnic identity often creates these same assumptions “about one’s past experiences, one’s authority to make certain claims” and about one’s beliefs (Alcoff, p. 90). These assumptions are unavoidable features within situational contexts, and especially in the post-secondary context, “we encounter too many people too quickly to come to know them as individuals, we have to make…guesses all the time” (Alcoff, p. 90). Similarly, all individuals, either consciously or unconsciously, develop ideas and attitudes about race.

To be seen and acknowledged within North American contexts, racialized individuals need to demonstrate that they can perform “in their North American voice… [while] White counterparts do not need to combine their ethnic identity with their North American one before being accepted as an important contributor to society and culture” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 119). This construction of identity is problematic, however, in that it ignores the multifaceted nature of identity. Identity is not a static quality, but is rather fluid and dynamic, and changeable. There is no one Canadian identity that an individual can draw upon, just as there is no specific ethnic or racial identity of an individual.
Intersectionality of identity allows individuals to bridge their multiple fluid identities and cultural norms and practices (Blume & De Reus, 2009). This positioning allows for the creation of unique, bi-cultural situational identities. Kalsi (2003) defines bi-culturalism as the “ability of a person to function effectively in more than one culture, and also to switch roles back and forth as the situation changes” (p. 1). According to Rosenthal (1987), people of differing ethnic backgrounds have the ability to adopt a variety of strategies to effectively negotiate their dual cultural environment. As diverse cultural and ethnic groups come into contact, more children have multicultural and multi-racial backgrounds, which incorporate a multiplicity of traditions and values (Ramsey, 2004; Renn, 2003). Roles and values of people within society have also changed, as groups evolve and their members absorb or resist the influences of other cultures (Ramsey). As a result, there are few people who identify themselves as exclusively belonging to any one cultural or ethnic group (Ramsey), and yet society still feels the need to organize people into discrete groups based on perceptions of race and gender (Renn, 2003). As we travel across countries and cultures, an individual’s perceived identity may change (Alcoff, 2006). People who operate within these contexts have to leave a part of themselves behind as they negotiate boundaries between their identities (Schutte, 2000).

When looking at how racialized individuals may choose to identify themselves contextually, Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) found that “deep conscious immersion into cultural traditions and values through religious, familial, and educational communities [instilled] a positive sense of ethnic identity” (p. 39). However, outside of
these shared cultural spaces, racialized individuals may have to filter their ethnic identities through negative treatment and media constructions. Most cultural images to which an individual is exposed in politics, entertainment, and literature is White, so much so that this cultural construction recedes into the periphery of consciousness (Alcoff, 2006). Mainstream society is about promoting White culture and maintaining the status quo, and racialized individuals face increasing pressure to fit in through assimilation.

**Research on situational identity.**

Kalsi’s (2003) study on bi-cultural identity formation explores the experiences of women of Punjabi descent living within the Canadian context. She suggests that these women use situational ethnicity as a tool to take advantage of multiple identities. Situational ethnicity permitted her participants “the option of selecting and discarding assorted cultural values and traditions” (p. 1) depending on their contexts, and how they wanted to be perceived by those around them. Within their home or shared cultural environments, Kalsi found that her participants strongly identified with their Punjabi identity, and transformed themselves and how they related to others with the values that they felt best exemplified the expectations of Punjabi women. When outside of these spaces, within the broader Canadian context, her participants transformed themselves again, and presented themselves in a manner that they felt was more progressive, and less restrictive than how they felt they needed to identify themselves within their home communities. Kalsi felt that the contextual meanings that her participants created played a “significant role in culturally shaping individuals” (p. 4) and, as a result, their dual identities as Punjabi women and as Canadian women.
When further examining bi-cultural identity construction, Cheng and Lee (2009) suggest that the negotiation of such identities requires two dimensions: conflict, in which the individual’s two identities represent “fundamental values…that contradict one another” (p. 53); and distance, where an individual’s dual identities are separate from one another. Their study took place on two large university campuses in the United States, and focused on identity integration among self-identified multi-racial undergraduate and graduate students. Using the 8-item, self-reporting, Multiracial Identity Integration (MII) Scale, Cheng and Lee found that racialized students who were raised in communities that represented their parents’ culture expressed positive ethnic experiences as adults within the post-secondary community, and had a higher degree of integration among their cultural identities. Those participants who grew up in “environments that exhibit racial tensions” had more negative experiences with regard to their perceived ethnic identity, and their cultural identities were not as highly integrated (p. 64). From their results, the researchers concluded that, by focusing on the positive effects of racialization, identity integration could be enhanced, and “in this way interventions that improve race relations can be enacted…at the societal level… [and] also at the individual level” (p. 66).

Educational institutions, such as Queen’s University, often mirror the attitudes of society, and, for racialized students, the issues of being viewed negatively by teachers, and being misinterpreted culturally, are of relevance (Spencer, 1999). The post-secondary context functions as a site of White-centered cultural domination—it is not about acknowledging and celebrating difference in students—instead the post-secondary space is about articulating sameness and lack of diversity. When nearly every cultural image in the media or politics is “uninterruptedly White, that very attribute [recedes] into the
background of consciousness, because it [is] so shared and normative” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 118).

Only recently have people identified as White become aware that they have gender and nationality, but most importantly, that they have a race (Alcoff, 2006). On the other hand, those who are not constructed as White have been made to feel their ethnic identity, and to be aware of a generalized other who was White, to whom their identity was peripheral (Alcoff). Identity affects the kind of relationship that racialized individuals have with their learning environments, and it is important for educators to make visible the invisible (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999).

**Educational effects of identity.**

Much of the popular knowledge on issues of diversity and race that educators acquire either reinforces or does not challenge mainstream conceptions. Educators accept these constructions as normative, and resist other forms of knowledge that might challenge these constructions, because these conceptions reinforce societal forms, such as economic or political structures, which are seen as being beneficial to the greater society (Banks, 2006). We all, either consciously or unconsciously, develop ideas and attitudes about diversity. These ideas are constructed, changed, and reinforced by our own personal experiences, and there is no endpoint to this construction as cultural dynamics are always changing. The contexts upon which we claim and establish identity and out of which we construct meaning are continually being erased and remade (Ramsey, 2004). Encounters in culturally diverse contexts influence a person’s perception and experience of self (Spencer, 1999). It is important for learning contexts to be “inclusive of
multicultural ways of doing, bases of knowledge, perspectives, and styles of educating” (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 44).

When looking at the achievement behaviours of racialized students within the classroom, there is more cause for concern. A 2006 study from the United States by Tyler, Boykin, and Walton explored achievement of racialized students within the public school classroom. The authors discovered cultural themes that are linked to achievement are not culturally neutral. The educators in their sample exhibited a strong bias towards achievement forms that were identified by the researchers as being linked to dominant White values, and negatively viewed those achievement forms that were associated with racialized cultural themes. Exchanges between the teacher and students were carefully mediated through things such as raising your hand, lining up at the teacher’s desk, and having only one person talk at a time, yet in different cultural contexts, different classroom behaviours are reinforced, depending on the communication style that is privileged within that context (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004; Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). The researchers from the study stated that the current school system is more focused on ensuring that the behaviours that students exhibit are in line with the dominant faction of society, which does not encourage diversity in learners and reinforces hegemony. This viewpoint is encouraged by teachers who are mostly White, and who do not themselves know what it means to be ‘other’ (Tyler et al.).

The relevance of this study to the current research is that it looks at the educators, and how their attitudes influence how racialized students see themselves within the academic context. Although this research takes place in the K-12 classroom, it is presumed that all students have exposure to these spaces prior to their post-secondary
school attendance. Viewpoints of these educators could easily translate to the post-secondary context at Queen’s University, where there is a dearth of faculty from racialized backgrounds (Henry, 2006).

Summary

Like gender, race is an important social category that individuals use to make sense of their socially constructed worlds (Cheng & Lee, 2006). It is individual beliefs and experiences that shape how racialization is experienced at the personal, social, and situational levels, and “ultimately, race is a part of the construction of self for people of colour” (Lewis & Bell, 2006, p. 264). When focusing on interactions within the post-secondary educational environment, ethnic identity affects the experiences and interpretation of relationships with others. Racialized individuals “bring to the learning environment vastly different experiences of treatment by teachers and peers” (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 45).

Racialized students within the post-secondary context may find their ethnic identities “constantly under surveillance” (Lewis & Bell, 2006, p. 265). As the concept of race is socially constructed, racialized individuals may not always agree with how they are positioned in this construction. However, they are still influenced by these frameworks, and their responses to these influences may cause them to change their personal identity or how they relate to their familial groups.

An examination of the literature reveals that the topic of identity construction among racialized female students in the post-secondary context has been largely overlooked by researchers. Instead, existing literature focuses on the experiences of three
groups: culturally-bound racialized individuals, bi-racial individuals, and multi-racial individuals. Most of the existing research comes from the American context, as very little research has been undertaken within the Canadian context. Data collection methodologies vary greatly across the studies, and studies that specifically focus on the identity construction of college students tend to utilize large-scale survey instruments that allow researchers to compare results both within and between research groups.

All people make assumptions based on personal, social, and situational identity, whether or not they are aware of it, and individuals need to become more reflective about how such assumptions operate, especially in a White-dominant post-secondary context, such as the context of the current study, Queen’s University. In the following chapter, I explain in detail how I set out to explore the experiences of four racialized female students within that context.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methods used in the present research study. My study was intended to provide insight into the identity constructions of four self-identified racialized female post-secondary students within the context of Queen’s University. Through the exploration of issues surrounding their personal, social, and situational identity construction, this study aimed to add to the limited research on racialized female post-secondary students within the Canadian educational context, thereby potentially improving experiences of such students and increasing their overall inclusiveness in a White-dominant post-secondary context.

This chapter begins with a discussion of why I chose to use qualitative research methods to collect my data. My section on data collection outlines the initial stages of my research, reviewing the procedures required to obtain ethics clearance from my Faculty and the university research ethics boards. The process of data collection is then discussed, including information on participants and the interview process. To finish the chapter, I describe the data analysis technique that I used.

Choice of Research Method

This study employed a qualitative design, since qualitative research methods allowed me to garner rich, thick descriptions about a few key informants (Patton, 2002), which was in keeping with the focus of this research. Previous research among racialized post-secondary students has been confined primarily to the American context, and has usually consisted of large-scale studies that involved multiple research sites and
methodologies, such as focus groups, interviews, and survey instruments. Previous studies have also almost exclusively considered the experiences of bi- or multi-racial individuals, or of students from monoracial groups. This study is among the first to consider racialized individuals as a general category, regardless of racial background, and further to look at the experiences of a single sex within this group.

Through the use of four semi-structured, open-ended interviews, this study examined the events, beliefs, and attitudes that my participants felt contributed to their sense of identity. Qualitative methodology helped me investigate issues that could not have been easily covered through the use of other research methods (Yin, 2006), and it enabled me to pursue deeper meanings from my participants in their own words (Patton, 2002).

**Data Collection**

**Participants.**

The participants in this study were four self-identified racialized female post-secondary students who attended Queen’s University for the 2009-2010 academic year: Teresa, Amara, April, and Monica. Participants were pre-screened via recruitment notices (see Appendix A) to meet various criteria for the study: participants had to be female and self-identify as racialized; under 30 years of age; have completed at least one full year of post-secondary education at Queen’s University prior to the start of the study; enrolled as full-time students at the time of the study; and have resided in Canada for a minimum of five years prior to the start of the study.
Teresa (all names are pseudonyms) was a 3rd year student. I had met Teresa during our undergraduate studies, and I knew her to be a passionate and well-spoken individual who would provide me with rich results. She was the first of my participants, and after being contacted, promptly set up a time to be interviewed. My second interview was with Amara, a student in Economics, minoring in Gender Studies. I had met Amara while I was delivering a guest lecture in a Women’s Studies class, and had mentioned that I was looking for participants for my study. Amara, along with April, who was a third year Life Sciences student and my third interview, volunteered to be a part of the study at that time. My final participant was Monica, whom I met at a school event. A fourth year Development Studies student, she was a keen and eager study participant. Based on the richness of data, I concluded that four interview participants were sufficient to respond to the research purpose and questions (deMarrais & Lapin, 2004).

I limited my participants to females because I was most interested in the female experience in that gender is an important facet of how identity is constructed (Alcoff, 2006). As a female, I also wanted to understand how other female racialized Queen’s students experienced their identity construction (Johnson, 2001). I selected the age limitation because I felt that it was at this time that an individual’s own unique identity was being established away from her familial primary groups (Buechler, 2008; Renn, 2000), as, for many individuals, it is the first time that they have lived away from home. Individuals are also making more independent decisions and experiencing more agency over their daily lives. They are also exposed to a diverse array of people and influences; I was interested in exploring if any of these differing facets influenced my participants' construction of their identities. The early years of adulthood experienced within an
academic context are also a time during which individuals are seeking, creating, and affirming their identities within the broader social networks that exist in the university context (Renn, 2000).

**Procedures.**

Before commencing interviews with my participants, I was required to follow Queen’s University’s procedures with respect to research on human subjects. I obtained ethical clearance from the Education Research Ethics Board (EREB) and the General Research Ethics Board (GREB) at the university. To obtain clearance through EREB and GREB, I had to include a number of protective practices in my research, as was outlined in my applications. I provided participants with a letter of information (LOI; see Appendix B), and participating interviewees had to give informed consent (see Appendix C). To protect the identities of my participants, it was indicated on the LOI that pseudonyms would be used in published material and that the secure storage of data would occur.

**Pilot interview.**

Prior to beginning my research interviews, I chose to conduct a pilot interview. The purpose of this interview was to simulate the interview process, and to test the questions that my participants would be asked (Patton, 2002). The participant for this interview was recruited through personal contacts, and fulfilled the criteria for my research interview participants. The pilot interview was the only interview that was conducted off-campus, and the raw data generated from this interview were not used for any purpose other than as a field test for the questions. The participant for this interview
was informed as to the intent of the interview, and received a letter of information as well as giving informed consent for the audio-recording of the interview.

**Research interviews.**

Primary data for this study were obtained through open-ended, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, lasting between 60-90 minutes. The manner in which the interviews were structured created the environment necessary to obtain the qualitative data to explore the experiences of female self-identified racialized post-secondary students. With my research question in mind, I found the open-ended interview approach the most salient. The design was intended to gain an in-depth “view of experience or a phenomenon of study” (deMarrais & Lappan, 2004, p. 52). The conversations with my participants provided me with authentic participant language and expression, which adds to the validity of the collected data (Patton, 2002). Open-ended interviewing let me establish an atmosphere of trust and friendliness with my participants, so that they would feel comfortable and willing to discuss potentially sensitive and personal topics. It was my hope in structuring the interviews more like conversations that I would be able to engage my participants in the process of self-exploration more easily, as participants would draw on personal experiences to answer open-ended questions.

Semi-structured interview techniques were used because such techniques provided a manner in which to understand the participants (Johnson, 2001), and allowed insight into the multiple ways in which my participants saw themselves within the broader Queen’s context. This format also gave me a great deal of flexibility in exploring participants' experiences, as, on the one hand, the format was somewhat structured, but, on the other hand, as the interviewer, I was able to deviate from the intended order of the
questions to further draw out rich data from my participants. This technique enabled me to follow specific threads of conversation more closely. However, the questions still served as my guide, and I asked them in a similar order across the interviews to increase comparability of responses among the different participants (Patton, 2002). Being face to face with participants allowed me to ask them to elaborate on their responses, or clarify questions for them (Bernard, 2000). The process for each of the interviews began with some small talk, and then segued into ice-breaker questions, which then led to the key interview questions (see Appendix D). Johnson (2001) recommended this approach to build rapport between the interviewer and the participant, so as to not “jeopardize intimate self-disclosure (or trust)” that is built during the interview process (p. 109).

The interview questions were designed in collaboration with one of my committee members, who had previously completed similar research, and who was also the Associate Director for the Equity Office at Queen’s University at the time that this study took place. After isolating the issues that I was interested in examining, we sat down and designed a series of questions that brought out these issues, while also addressing my research question. These questions were then presented to my supervisor, who made some minor changes to the formatting and order of the questions and was the one to suggest holding a pilot interview to field test the questions and make changes as required for content or interview length.

The research interviews for this study were conducted at Queen’s University in the 2010 winter semester. Interviews were up to 90 minutes in length, and were audio-recorded. Participants were provided with a letter of information as well as a consent form, which was reviewed and signed prior to the commencement of the recorded portion
of the interviews. The objectives of the interview were to (a) explore participants’ thoughts and motivations when it came to applying to/deciding to attend Queen’s University for their post-secondary education; (b) explore, in-depth, the participants’ individual perceptions of the cultural landscape of the Queen’s University context; (c) investigate their personal experiences negotiating and creating identities as racialized Queen’s University students; (d) explore and examine if any barriers or constraints were acting upon their construction of identity within the broader social and academic context at Queen’s; and (e) investigate their thoughts and perceptions of the inclusiveness of post-secondary education in general.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, and I also took field notes while audio-recording the interview. Each participant was given as much time as she needed to answer the questions, and, at the end of the interview, each participant was offered the opportunity to make additional comments. Participants were also given the chance to review their interview transcript if they so chose, to expand upon or explain their responses. The responses from each interview were then used as the data for this study.

**Data Analysis**

The first step in my research process was the data collection. In order to organize my data, I used an inductive approach, and organized my data into codes. These codes were then grouped by concept, and were categorized and used to form the basis of the theory that informed the rest of my thesis.

One set of interview transcripts was used for the analysis process. According to Basit (2003), interview transcripts act as a unit of raw data that cannot communicate the
participants’ experiences or understandings without being analyzed. I began the analysis by reading the transcripts several times until they became familiar to me. The next step for me was to begin coding. To begin coding, the interview transcripts from each participant were read, and then coded for themes, concepts, and ideas (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). According to Seidman (1998), the easiest way to start coding is by marking the statements that are interesting. Using nVivo 7, the transcripts were coded, using my participants’ statements that were interesting and pertinent to the research question.

The coding process was among the most time-consuming activities of completing this thesis, as a series of codes was created and discarded as new interesting and important “bibbits” of information were found in the transcripts (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). The coding process allowed me to identify certain elements of the data that underscored the key points of the data. These codes corresponded to information in the transcripts on friends; family background; languages spoken; previous schooling experiences; religion; notions of Whiteness and privilege; diversity; diversity at Queen’s; social life; racism; identity. The sheer number of the codes was unwieldy, but it was the nature of the open-ended semi-structured interview that most of what was said in the conversation was of note, and all of it impacted the identities of my participants.

After the initial coding was complete, it was clear that the codes could be further consolidated into similar concepts, which became a collection of different codes that helped further group the data. The use of structured open-ended interviewing allowed me to compare and contrast responses by my participants, as the same questions were asked of all of them (Patton, 2002). Concepts from the different research interviews were organized according to the following; issues of racism and diversity were grouped
together; family background, language, and religion were grouped together; social life and K-12 schooling were grouped together; and all things that pertained to Queen’s were grouped together. Similar concepts and ideas emerged across my interviews with each of the participants, which made these concepts “grounded in the data” (Strauss & Glasser, 1998, p. 6).

The concepts were subsequently organized into three categories—personal, social, and school. After conducting my data analysis, I found a more formal manner in which to refer to these three categories, which slightly changed the previous organization of my thesis. This organization became echoed throughout my thesis. The final categories that gave structure to my thesis were personal identity, social identity, and situational identity—the latter dealing with how my participants experienced the academic context. These categories were then used to form the basis of a theory. The use of nVivo 7 streamlined this process, and gave me flexibility in the coding process, as the organization of codes and concepts was more fluid within and among the participants, using a digital medium rather than through manipulation of a hard copy.

With the organization of my data complete, I then set out to present the findings of my participants. Trying to find a way to reconcile the voices of my participants with more traditional methods of presenting findings proved to be a challenge. When I tried to do so, the result was stilted and unnatural. The data and my participants required a more innovative approach, and instead of writing from a detached perspective as the researcher, I chose to present my findings in a narrative, storytelling format. By reading the transcripts and by listening to the audio of the interviews, I tried to preserve as much of the context of each participants’ voice as was possible. The process of reading the
transcripts alone would not have been enough to write this section, as valuable
information is contained in the way that a participant may have spoken on a particular
subject.

The concepts and categories were a helpful tool in organizing the portraits of my
participants, and in organizing the interview responses from all four participants. By
conveying my research results in my participants’ voices, I was able to remain consistent
with the method of qualitative interviewing (Seidman, 1998). The next chapter contains
these participant portraits. In writing the portraits, I tried to maintain the integrity of my
participants’ stories through direct quotations as well as paraphrasing. I chose this
technique of presenting my findings to preserve my participants and their stories, rather
than making their story my own. To distinguish their voices from that of my own and
from the rest of the thesis, I used a different font style.
Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the information that I gleaned from my conversations with my participants. Each of the four women (Teresa, Amara, April, and Monica) whose portraits are included in this chapter sat down with me for a semi-structured discussion. All discussions took place on Queen’s University campus during the winter semester. Each participant’s portrait is organized around three themes that emerged through the course of my discussions with her. These three themes are self-reflexive, as they explore my participants’ perceptions of their identity, their social involvement, and their school involvement.

Teresa

Teresa is a 26-year-old graduate student in the Faculty of Education, and was the only one of my participants to be born in Kingston, although her parents moved away when she was young. Teresa grew up in an affluent area just outside of Toronto, and had previously attended McMaster University for her undergraduate work in Philosophy and Social Studies. Teresa’s parents were both physicians; they had immigrated to Canada from East Africa to complete their residencies, although their families were originally from India many generations back.

Our conversation took place in early January, before most of the students were back, with the library deserted, except for the staff. We met one snowy and cold winter afternoon, during a break between Teresa’s classes. As she arrived, she apologized profusely for the fact that our time together was limited, and promised to meet with me
again if needed. It soon became apparent that another interview would not be required, as I found Teresa to be very well-spoken and articulate, and above all passionate about her works and her goals, especially with regard to social justice and diversity issues. She gave detailed responses to all of my questions, and stayed focused on the questions that were asked, with little digression from the thread of the conversation.

Personal identity.

I feel that culturally, I identify very strongly with my “Canadian-ness” rather than my East African or Indian roots. I think I grew up “without really identifying with my Indian roots,” which is really interesting, because, on both sides of my family, my grandparents are very religious. My mom is Hindu and my dad is Telagu, which created some problems for them amongst the Hindu population in East Africa, “because there are still some issues about mixing,” but they “all practice Hinduism, and every household has a lamp.” I think this distance from my Indian roots is partially explained by the fact that, although my grandparents are very religious, my dad’s parents are in Africa, and my mom’s parents are out on the East Coast, and we are in Ontario, so we don’t really see them often. Growing up I didn’t really have them around me, and “I didn’t really have that culture to identify with.”

“My parents really kind of separated out religion” and we “didn’t really go to temple or things like that, we did prayers on Diwali

4 Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights.
5 Saraswathi is the Hindu goddess of wisdom.
man of colour in Malawi to get [a Master’s in history], and to become an academic, which was big in his day.” I consider myself to be “agnostic, having done a philosophy degree. I kind of came up with my own idea of spirituality” probably as a result of “never [having] religion imposed on me in any way growing up.”

My family and their accomplishments have instilled a strong sense of social justice in me, and one of the reasons that we grew up speaking only English around the house was because my father had never learned Afrikaans - he saw it as being “the language of the oppressor.” My grandfather, my mother’s father, also influenced my passion for social justice issues, as he was awarded an Order of Canada for his work with East Coast Black communities. My interest in working with Aboriginal communities is definitely influenced by his work. When he immigrated to Canada with my grandmother, “he got right in there with the Civil Rights movement on the East Coast, and gave lectures and was involved with some of the organizations.” I saw that example, and my thought was “well, he’s not Black, but he still works with these communities to try and address racialized inequality and discrimination, so why can’t I do that?”

My commitment to social justice and equity issues comes “directly from being a minority,” and my work with the Aboriginal Students Society has allowed me to expand my own identity as a racialized student. “Instead of just being an Indian minority” I have become “a minority in a more abstract sense.” I have to be really careful not to speak for a group of people that I don’t belong to, because “I don’t face the same tribulations [or] have
the same history that these people have,” but I strongly feel that “it is every
Canadian’s responsibility to be aware of Aboriginal issues.” I think that it is
“my responsibility to draw out these issues and talk about them with
sensitivity, and not just ignore them because it is too challenging.” I think
that most Canadians avoid these issues because “they say, ‘well I am not
Aboriginal, so this has nothing to do with me’—I might not be Aboriginal but
clearly it has something to do with me.” This has nothing to do with my own
experiences of being marginalized or being the focus of racism, “which has
happened once or twice... but really it’s because I feel like there is a
responsibility there” because Aboriginal issues “are the biggest racialized
frontier in Canada” and my acting as an advocate for these issues, well
“some of that comes from my grandfather’s history.”

My identity has been slowly changing over time - when I look back to
what I was like in high school, I have really transformed. I still think of
myself as someone who is resistant to being “labelled” and that I still
challenge “mainstream” constructions of what “Indian girls should be like.” In
high school, I found myself “identifying a lot with subcultures.” Most of my
friends “were into non-mainstream sorts of activities.” I really felt disengaged
and disinterested in the clichéd high school experience, and I really prided
myself on the things that I wasn’t—I wasn’t “a jock” and I wasn’t the keener
“overachieving, award-winning student” and I wasn’t anyone “who stuck
around [at school] any longer than you possibly needed to. I was out of there
at lunch... after school, didn’t participate in any extra-curricular activities.” I
didn’t want to engage in school more than the bare minimum, “for whatever
reason,” and that continued for most of my time at high school. It wasn’t until OAC that I became more involved and less disengaged in the academic experience.

When I reflect upon what my identity has become in the intervening years, I think I would identify myself as a “philosopher, because I have my philosophy background now, and it is a huge part of who I am.” I like to “think deeply about what I am doing, and why I am doing it, and what is going on around me.” In terms of “my background in Social Studies, I feel I am very social justice oriented.” That is “a big part of how I think, and how I perceive the world.”

Social identity.

I still have a lot of the same friends that I did in high school, although our paths have gone in different directions over the years, and we have changed over time. I was “pretty angsty” in high school, and I really found myself identifying with “subcultures like hackey-sack.” I also did a lot of things that girls didn’t do—“I spent a lot of time watching cartoons and being into anime and comic books and things that I could use to distinguish myself from expectations”; these expectations could be laid on you for “being an Indian girl, because they are there and I had nothing to do with it.” I really didn’t “want to be associated with those pretty girls” and, at the time for me, it was about “being a part of the marginalized group.”

This desire to distance myself from the mainstream didn’t really change much over the course of my undergrad, and when I came to Queen’s, my closest friends were “mature students... I sort of gravitated to them
because they weren’t going to be as easily influenced by this kind of cookie-cutter transformation” that I had stayed away from for so long. It “was really difficult at times to make friends here, because it’s very cliquey… if you’re not in the group they want nothing to do with you.” Being surrounded by this mentality makes me feel that I have had to be more careful about how I behave and express myself. “When I am at home, I am not battling anything; I’m just with my friends… I’m comfortable with them; I don’t have anything to prove, whereas here… it’s a constant show of… ‘am I going to hold a view that somebody is going to hold against me later?’ I constantly ask myself, how much am I really willing to speak out? It’s a constant walking on eggshells feeling sometimes.”

The experiences that I have had while here are different from other women—women of colour, racialized minority women—because “I’m not a part of the Queen’s Asian society… I go to their dinners and stuff and I have friends there,” but I don’t really feel involved. “I don’t like the idea of racially divided clubs,” which tends to set me apart from my colleagues. “I have a lot of colleagues, minority, visible minority, females—who have similar experiences but who went in a different direction with it, and keep to their culture.” I don’t really feel that “I have that culture to identify with, so it’s been a little bit out of my own waters, I don’t know how else to describe it.” I guess “some people are just marginalized, and they don’t fall into any [specific] categories.” As someone who “looks Indian, but doesn’t [have] an Indian-straight-from-India identity, you have to constantly fight people’s assumptions” about who you are and how you perceive yourself. As a
smoker, I am outside a lot when I am at bars, “trying to disillusion these
guys who are trying to pick me up, that you really can have a lot more to
yourself than what people see when they first look at you.” I try to
“challenge them endlessly... you draw something out of people when you
force them into conversations where they have to expose their own deeply
held views.” I really make an effort to get to know people “on that level; it’s
something that comes out of my interest in diversity.”

Situational identity in academic contexts.

When talking about school, I really have to go back to high school, and
my experiences in high school. We lived in an affluent, White neighbourhood
in Oakville from the time that I was 6 years old. The student population at
my high school was not diverse. “There were very few visible minorities, and
the ones that were there... it was one of those things where there were a
handful of Black students, and in the caf they would call their table ‘Cafrica’
because it was so easily identifiable.” I really kept myself removed from the
mainstream high school experience. My parents had certain expectations of
me; however, “the baseline was that [they] basically said that that if you
don’t get 80s, you’re grounded. So I got my 80s and I got out of there.” I
pretty much just did what I had to—“I didn’t become someone who was
interested in that kind of thing until my last year of high school and into my
undergrad.” I didn’t want to get sucked in, because “once you’re surrounded
by mostly middle-class to upper White people, there is this built-in set of...
behaviours.” You find yourself assimilating, and changing, “you adopt some
of this stuff; you sort of become [Whiter] in some ways… which is part of
why I rejected the mainstream high school community so much.”

When I came to Queen’s, I felt that I had very much been transported
back to my high school in many ways. Queen’s is “not a diverse place, it’s a
very White rich place,” and I wasn’t really into it. I had just come from
McMaster, “where everything is so diverse, and you don’t really run into that
‘everyone’s White, wow!’ There is not a lot of ethnic flavour to anything going
on around here.” You could walk into the student center at McMaster, and
see a “Sikh dance going on… or some sort of culturally oriented festival going
on in the middle of a school day, and you never see that here.” It’s also the
first place that anyone “ever asked me if I spoke English… I mean, what do
you take me for, just because I am a person of colour, I don’t speak
English?” It has been really frustrating for me, being here, because my grasp
on English comes from a “university educated background, it’s the only
language I speak, and I’m asked this question on the basis of the colour of
my skin, which is shocking.”

Being here, and being in graduate school, there is a lot of pressure on
you to follow a certain career path, and to practice in a certain way. The
mentality around my Faculty is one of assimilation, and not of challenging
the current system. I have “always responded with resistance to that kind of
pull anyways.” Being here and experiencing the climate has only
strengthened my commitment to “work with government” and to one day
either work with or found an NGO. “My interest has always been a little bit

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6 Non-Governmental Organization.
of a minority in itself, and I feel that I have moved closer to identifying with that rather than further away.”

Because of the climate here, my interest in social justice in diversity issues has really come out. My work in these areas was recently rewarded when I received a diversity award from my department. It felt really good to have my contributions acknowledged, especially because I feel that the only reason I got in here was on an equity initiative. I sometimes get the sense that they want to ignore my contributions. One of the things that has happened to me in my time here, “I had organized an Aboriginal Education Students Society [brown bag] lunch thing... I had sent out a few emails,” and I also had a colleague in the program send out one so that they were not all coming from me. My colleague sent out the email a few days before the event, and “one of the top administrators in the [department] sent him directly a ‘thank you so much for all your hard work... would you like to be our contact person for Aboriginal applicants?’” I found that to be really interesting, because “not only did I organize everything to do with the event, but I’m the president of the society.” I had sent out all the emails previous to this one, and my name had been on everything. My colleague was not involved in any of that. “I don’t mean to be petty, but that hurt a little bit. You work so hard for something, and you attach your name to something, and then someone else gets all the credit” just from one email. So getting the award after that, it felt good.
**Reflections on the interview.**

When reflecting on the conversation with Teresa, there are two things that really stand out. The first thing that stands out is how confident and self-assured she is. The language that Teresa uses and the way that she expresses herself present a picture of an individual who is very secure in who she is. She makes conscious choices about the types of people with whom she wants to be friends, and has a clear direction of where she wants her career to go. Although she is not the ‘angsty’ teen that she used to identify as, she is still someone who doesn’t want to fit into a mould. Yet there are also glimpses of vulnerability in her character. For Teresa, it is significant to gain external validation of her efforts on behalf of the causes in which she believes, such as her work with the Aboriginal Students Association, and the diversity award that she subsequently received.

Second, Teresa identifies herself as having lived experiences that are those of a Minority with a capital “M”; she views herself strongly as being a member of the marginalized group, rather than by membership in any particular cultural or ethnic group. She recognizes that she may appear to have a South Indian identity, but she very much perceives herself as someone who does not have “an Indian straight-from-India” identity. For her, if you are not White and accorded the privileges inherent in being White, then you are racialized. She does not make any judgments about others who may choose to identify themselves according to their ethnic identity, but really feels that she herself is Canadian. Growing up, she did not have the exposure to religion or culture that other Indian girls may have had, that would make identification within this group easier for her, and as a result does not feel that she can claim membership to this group. Her experiences
instead were such that they have translated to her interests in social justice issues, towards marginalized racialized groups, and towards her future career goals.

Amara

Amara is a 19-year-old undergraduate student in her second year. She was born in Calgary, and moved to Ottawa at the beginning of Grade 10. Her parents had emigrated from East Africa before Amara was born. Both sides of Amara’s family were originally from India. When the political situation in their country showed signs of instability, her parents decided to come to Canada. Although Amara’s parents speak Swahili, both Amara and her older sister only learned how to speak Kutchi, an Indian language from a region of Gujarat, as well as English.

Our discussion took place near the end of January, right before the big push for exams. We met in the middle of a busy work day, but managed to find a secluded spot to talk; the conversation flowed freely as Amara answered my queries as thoroughly as she could. Amara was an enthusiastic participant, freely sharing her experiences with me on that afternoon.

Personal identity.

I am not sure how to identify myself. “When people ask me where I am from, I say that I am from Canada” because that is where I am geographically from, but I am Muslim as well, and I don’t always know how to bring that in. I think of myself as Canadian, and as a Muslim. As a Muslim, I am “Shi’a” and Ismaili, and we’re a lot more modern and liberal [than

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7 Shi’a is the second largest denomination of Islam.
8 Ismailism is a branch of Shi’a Islam.
other sects of Islam], and I feel that it is very misconcerting [sic] for people when you tell them that you are a Muslim, because they associate” being Muslim with a “certain kind of oppression of women.” There is little distinction between my religion and my culture; all “of my traditions are Ismaili,” but they are also cultural as well. I feel that being Canadian, “makes me more modern and liberal, but in addition, I am of the world too. I am not putting anything down. I am just saying that in my life you don’t have to be a certain way... I think that within that, and within my religion and culture, that they really coincide.”

Growing up, I would say that my cultural and ethnic influences were more Canadian, although “we still had a lot of Indian traditions.” We’re very family-oriented, so on “Eid⁹ my Grandma would throw a huge family dinner, and we would spend time together, and go to the Mosque, that kind of thing.” It wasn’t just our family that did these things, but the larger Ismaili community that we are a part of. We’re a pretty small sect within the religion, and I feel the religious aspect of my identity is “really integrated into my life.”

Being a part of a minority group is “sometimes a little bit of a barrier. I think it is just the way that people perceive you, not anyone of higher authority, but just within us and how we view ourselves.” The assumptions that we make about the way that we are, and the way that people externally think of us—it can be a problem. “I try to step out of it, but you have to be uncomfortable in order to be in a different place, with people of different

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⁹ Eid is an Islamic holiday that marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan.
cultures... sometimes they don’t see the same things that you do or they assume... it doesn’t help being a Muslim at all, you have to defend more” than you can just be yourself. Being a part of such a small group within the religion, I feel I have to do that a lot when I am in different settings, so instead I just choose to be around people who are more like me, and to whom I don’t need to constantly explain or defend myself.

There are two aspects to my identity, the person I am when I am at home with my family, and the person I am when I am not at home. I can express things outside of my family “that I am not really allowed to at home. No, not allowed to, but some things my parents would” definitely have issues with. Like, for example, alcohol. My parents, they just have a don’t ask, don’t tell policy. “They don’t want to know about it. I have a boyfriend, and my parents are okay with it... but again, there are things that they don’t want to know about, and that they don’t want to happen. I feel like for everyone else, it just kind of happens and it’s a normal kind of thing for everybody else,” but I have to tip-toe my way through it.

I am “definitely more censored [when I am at home] and I am more - I don’t know, I think it might just have to do with being home. You just can’t say all the things that you would; you are just under your parents’ rules, so it is a bit different.” I feel more connected to my heritage when I am at home, “because my mom cooks Indian food... and we say prayers. At home, it just happens more, [whereas] here, if I am not the one doing it, it just doesn’t get done.” I think my parents’ expectations definitely influence me,
and who I am. “They expect me to share in the values that they raised me with. I mostly do, but as you grow older you have your own values.”

Social identity.

I went to a mix of public and private schools before I came to Queen’s, and going to different schools impacted the people that I was friends with. I was in public school for a year, in Grade 10, and there was a lot more discrimination than I had noticed previously, with both the educators and the other students. “At the private school, you were able to hang out with the other White kids, but at the public school all the brown kids kind of cohesively stuck together because it was easier with the amounts of people.” Compared to the diversity in the public schools, the private schools that I went to did not have a lot of diversity in their student population. “I was usually the only brown kid in my section—there was maybe one more, but [it was] mostly White.” I also had some friends from my religious community, but it wasn’t until I came to university that my school friends also shared my cultural identity.

I am in a couple of clubs now, “but the clubs that I identify with are racialized clubs.” I am on the exec of the Ismaili club at Queen’s, and I am on QMED\textsuperscript{10} which is “all brown Pakistanis.” I strongly feel that “the things that I am involved with at Queen’s have a connection somehow to my culture or race.” This is because, for me, it is “easiest to get involved in that way.” It is important to me to be a part of campus groups that incorporate aspects of my identity and my cultural background. “I have no shame in being what I

\textsuperscript{10} Queen’s Movement for Educational Development.
am, but I think it’s easiest too, especially at Queen’s, to relate to people who you have” things in common with, “because it is harder to talk to [people] who” don’t share the same values as you, or have the same experiences as you, who do things differently than the way that you do them. It is not something that I thought about before, but everything that I talk about “puts me in a minority... I’m a Muslim, I’m Ismaili, I am a female.” It is “hard to relate to White people” sometimes, although I do think that I have “more White friends than I have Asian ones.”

I like to think that I am someone who doesn’t get swayed easily by those around me, and that I can remain true to myself, but sometimes that gets lost when I have been trying to fit in. “I drink, but I am not the type who likes to drink and go out all the time and drinks until I am crazy, or anything.” I have been in situations, like during frosh in my first year, where I have been put into awkward positions, “and just to make sure that I was making friends, I would put what I [actually wanted to do] at the back and kind of [do things] because everyone else was.” There have also been instances in terms of my personal life—when “you’re dealing with White guys, or you’ve been in a relationship with someone who doesn’t share the same kind of religious and cultural values that you do,” there are a lot of different expectations to deal with, and these are dependent upon what situation I am in.

People also have expectations of you. I think that “people think that if you are brown, you are going to be part of a brown group and associate with one of the ones that are at Queen’s, or more than one.” This is not far off
base, as I belong to a lot of these cultural or religious groups, but I think that people also feel that “if you’re brown you’ll be able to relate to one of the brown groups” just because of your skin colour. I think that even I am guilty of making these assumptions. “I [have] had expectations of people coming in and wanting to belong, and they didn’t want to, and it’s negative... to assume that” just based on what you look like, you have a desire to be connected to the larger community of people you may appear to represent.

**Situational identity in academic contexts.**

I went to “a private school for junior high and high school.” I was pretty much the only brown kid at the school. There may have been one other, but “it was mostly White.” Before this, I had attended public school briefly, and it was much easier for me to be at a private school, because they were much more accepting of my ethnicity. “You could still feel that you were the only brown kid, but it was a lot more taboo to point that out.” In the public school, “the teachers didn’t pay any attention” to the minority kids. “It didn’t matter if I had a question or something. They didn’t do it abruptly but you could tell that we—the coloured students - were kind of their last priority.” I don’t know if this was actually the case, or “if I just felt like it was.”

I feel like the “teachers cared more in the private school, and kind of treated everyone equally, whereas in the public school it felt like they figured that we didn’t have a chance and just kind of ignored us.” It may have been because there were so many students; however, “it was like the people who got the attention were clearly not coloured.” The distinction was definitely
there—“no one would go out and be all ‘I’m not helping her because she is brown,’ but the implication was there... I felt it.”

I sometimes feel it at Queen’s as well. In classes, and in tutorials, “not anything serious, but just where people are really ignorant about things, and I feel like you need to be” wait a minute here. It is not their fault, it is the way that the media presents things, and “they are wrong most of the time, but they wouldn’t know... unless we tell them, so I don’t know.” I am not saying that it is something intentional, “but everyone watches the news, everyone gets certain images... it is so hard to explain to someone who isn’t wanting to know... it’s really hard to fight, because Muslims as a whole aren’t doing anything for themselves... a little group of people isn’t making it easy for all of us, so that is always going to be around, it is not going to change.”

I just feel helpless sometimes against the constant assumptions. “I was in a class on race and racism, and I happened to look around, and I was the only brown, coloured student.” It is really “hard to understand racism [if you] have never been racialized... when you have White privilege.” I mean, the other people in the class were clearly there to educate themselves; “it was the first step for something.” I just think that the atmosphere on campus is not very inclusive. “I feel outside to classrooms that are small, and I feel like sometimes you are an outsider, you don’t have the same outlook on life. Some people that are more privileged, they do have the same kinds of experiences - that is when I feel outside,” because I don’t share in those experiences, and “maybe that is why I am more drawn to my own.” I still participate and try to be a part of things, even if I don’t share the same
experiences; I am not intimidated by that. “The instructors are really good, they are all neutral and equal, which is really cool. From them I don’t feel it at all, mostly by peers is when you feel it.”

**Reflections on the interview.**

Although Amara presents herself as someone who is very confident and secure in her identity as a Muslim and Canadian woman, there are many contradictions in her narrative about what it means to identify as either. It was difficult at times to follow her through the conversation, as she made statements that were contradictory. I think these contradictions arise from Amara attempting to figure out the person that she wants to be, between the competing forces of her parents’ cultural expectations, and those of society around her.

Something that stood out during the course of our conversation was how strongly Amara felt about her identity as a Muslim. She tied this aspect of who she was to her personal, social, and academic experiences, although she was also careful to point out that the sect of Islam to which she belonged was a minority among the faith. Amara felt that, as an Ismaili Muslim, her identity was distinct from the stereotypical Muslim female identity and expectations. However, although Amara felt strong ties to Islam, there were points during our conversation that shed some doubts on how faithful she really was to her religious ideals. For example, Amara mentions that, while she was not someone who liked to drink a lot, she still consumed alcohol, which is strictly against Islam, regardless of the denomination to which one belongs.

There were some areas of contradiction within Amara’s interview. For instance, Amara discusses how it is easiest at Queen’s to relate to people who have shared experiences and belong to the same community as her, and that she seeks these people
out when in classes or social situations. She feels that around these people she does not
have to face constant assumptions about what it means to be a Muslim, and a woman, and
does not need to defend herself for being who she is. However, she then goes on to say
that she has more friends she identifies as White, than those she identifies as brown.

Amara is still negotiating what it means to be both Muslim and Canadian, and
how to convey this duality to people around her. She is trying to find a space between the
person that she is when she is at home with her family, and the person that she is away
from the expectations that her parents have of her.

April

April is a 20-year-old undergraduate student in her third year of study. She was
born in Toronto to parents who had immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong before she
was born. April grew up in a middle-class area of Toronto, and went to high school in
downtown Toronto before coming to Queen’s.

I had first connected with April when I was doing a guest lecture for one of her
classes in the fall semester, and, as a racialized woman, she expressed interest in my
research area. Many of the issues that we discussed during the course of our conversation
were things that April had not previously thought about or questioned. April took her
time measuring her responses to these issues, and then offering carefully thought-out
replies.

Our interview took place in a secluded area of Queen’s University, and partially
overlapped with the lunch hour. April was eating her lunch for part of the conversation,
and, as such, I felt that it took us a while to establish a rapport, due to the distraction that
food consumption provided. However, as the time passed, April grew more comfortable offering longer responses to my questions, and the discussion had a better flow.

**Personal identity.**

I grew up in Toronto, to parents who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong before I was born. My background is Cantonese-Canadian, but I think of myself as being “a little more White-washed” than most of the Asian students that you see around. Unless I am talking to my parents or a close older family member, I won’t speak in Cantonese, which is different from a lot of people that I see around me. I “don’t enjoy particularly Asian activities... I don’t listen to Chinese music” and when asked about anything “pop culture” related, I am completely clueless. It is not because “I don’t know how to read [Cantonese], or I am not fluent. It is just a matter of—it doesn’t really fit into my lifestyle, you know?” I like to do things that fall outside of the usual expectations of an Asian girl. “I get a lot of personal satisfaction from being like, ‘yeah, that is right—I am doing something that you didn’t think I could do.’”

I have an older brother, and I guess you could say that our growing up experiences were typically Asian. “I went to math classes outside of school, I went to Chinese school, you know?” My parents were very involved with my education and the activities that I did outside of school. Although I was involved with a lot of extra-curricular activities like swimming, piano, and badminton, if my parents felt those things were affecting my education, I would have to cut back.
Since I have been in university, I have had some more freedom to make decisions that my parents would have made for me previously. “I know a lot of Asian families are into the whole ‘go into science, do something with your life,’” and my family is no exception. When I decided to minor in Gender Studies, “my parents, and even some of my friends, [thought] I was ridiculous pretty much. [They] think that Gender Studies is a dead-end program.” I think that is because my “parents both grew up in large families, my mom is one of nine siblings, so they always stressed the ‘you have to work hard because you can’t rely on someone to support you or baby you through life.’”

Since I have come to university, my parents “have a lot less say in what I do with my time, just because we are not in the same city, and I don’t live with them.” I got into a really big disagreement with my mom over how much time I spend in the pool for synchronized swimming practices—“she was all like ‘you are not going to spend any time studying, when are you going to study, how are you going to do well?’” They are really funny that way “in that they will encourage me, but if they think I am going off course they will be ‘stop doing that!’” I am lucky though; I have a lot more freedom than some of my friends. My “parents don’t have much say in things, for example, what classes I decide to take, because I know some of my friends’ parents do... so in a sense, my parents are more liberal.”

Social identity.

I don’t have a lot of Asian friends at Queen’s, which is really different from my high school experience, where all of my friends were Asian, because
most of the student population was Asian. Most of my friends were Cantonese. We had similar family structures and family expectations. We hung out a lot during the school day when we were at school, but there was not much socializing outside of school hours, on weekends, or during holidays. I think this is because very few people lived near the school, and the rest of us were spread out over Toronto. Our school was also a lot smaller than most schools, which led to there being a really close-knit community when at school, so we didn’t really need to socialize outside of school.

“Most of my friends now are friends that I lived with in first year,” that I have continued living with. It’s interesting because “as a house we don’t really socialize much, outside of each other. Other friends that I have made are all from synchro, from volunteering, meeting peoples’ friends—that kind of thing.” When I first came here, I “felt like everyone that I met who was Asian was also Christian, or they were really into religion, or they had to be part of a Taiwanese Club or the Hong Kong Student Association.” That just didn’t fit in with who I was, or who I wanted to be. I’m “not religious, and I doubt that I ever will be, so it made me uncomfortable when they would try to recruit me.” I didn’t really want to do any of that, and so it made me shy away from being friends with Asian people, because it seemed like that was what they were all about. The friends that I have made, even though they are all White, don’t make me feel any differently “because I am Asian, so that is the good part about that.”
One of the things that I got involved in after coming to Queen’s has been synchronized swimming, and I think that I have made a lot of my closest friends through this activity. Synchronized swimming is one of the things that really sets me apart from my Asian peers. It was “something that I always wanted to try... so I got into it in first year.” I think one of the few times that my heritage comes up is when I am in the pool for synchronized swimming. “Especially at swim meets, when everyone is putting on their... competition suits—sometimes they are designed so that there is a ‘nude’ part—which is supposed to blend in with your skin colour, and that always makes me really aware” of my heritage.

The teams from other schools are also “White, White, White.” When I first started, the fact that I was not White “made me want to stick it out even more, in the sense that I wanted to do something that wasn’t ‘normal’ you know?” I mean, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that “only White people can do synchro, because that is obviously not true,” and the other swimmers are all very friendly, nice people “but I was just interested in being pretty much the only Asian” on the team. The situation on the team has changed a bit since my first year though, and there are currently a few other Asian girls on the team, “which is totally off the wall, because [now] half of our team is Asian, and you don’t see that anywhere else.”

I think that I “identify with... I’m better friends with the White girls on my team, because we actually show up for practices and things on time.” The other Asian girls on the team just don’t seem to take it very seriously—one girl only made it to half the practices last term; “she keeps kicking people in
the pool, and we are getting to the point where it is just really annoying.” So
our team just ends up dividing ourselves that way. “It’s different when we
are in a social setting, because then we can actually talk amongst all of us,
but at practices it is kind of divided.” I can’t say for certain if the division is
just because they are Asian, “because if you are just looking at it, there is a
very clear division, but at the same time it also has to do with personality,
and the way that they think, and their attitudes, and maybe that has to do
with culture and race too.”

I also do volunteer things in the community, so that I don’t feel like I
am living in a bubble, “I volunteer at a soup kitchen, and just some other
volunteer things now and again.” I have never been one for being involved in
organized, mainstream activities, like campus clubs. I also feel like
participation is “really cliquey, and since a lot of groups tend to be White, it
gets perpetuated that way.” Your involvement gets based around “who you
know, and not necessarily what you can do. I was talking to one of my
housemates about the Queen’s Journal and she was saying that if you are
friends with the five people that write for it, you can write an article for
them.” It is harder to get involved in things if you don’t know someone, and
“easier to make a good impression if someone already knows something
about you.”

The reason that I don’t socialize with people in my program is because
“I already see so many students every day in my classes” that I need to do
things outside of school. There is a Life Sciences “social thing coming up, and
there is the banquet and the big shebangs [sic],” which are not my thing. “I
imagine if I went I would probably meet some more people who were like me, and that might be interesting, but at the same time I am comfortable where I am.” I don’t really want to be a part of the whole Life Sciences thing, where everyone who is not in the program thinks that “Life Sci kids are so freaking intense, all they know is Life Sci, and medicine, and grad school.” I really want to distance myself from that. I am already living the stereotype, since “I am Asian, and in Life Sciences.”

**Situational identity in academic contexts.**

I went to a semi-private school in Toronto for high school. It “was weird, in that we got funding and were affiliated with the University of Toronto, but you had to pay tuition and write an entrance exam to get in.” I think the only way to describe the student population at my high school would be to say that “most of them were of above average intelligence, and by the time that I left, the entering class was mostly Asian” students. I really liked being a student there, and had a great experience. When I compare my high school experiences to what it has been like after coming to university, “I feel like we were sheltered a lot. I [knew] that other public schools” had bigger classes, and more students, “while our school was a lot smaller, and a lot more closely knit.”

In terms of my experiences at Queen’s, I really like being in Life Sciences. I think it is “good, it is a great program” but at the same time there is always that group of students “that always sits in the front who are like ‘excuse me, I don’t think you said that right’ and I feel like” there are a lot of these types of people in my program. I think it’s annoying, and “you
don’t want to be that annoying person - I feel like our program is kind of stereotyped as everyone is that kind of person,” everyone is thought to be a keener. I don’t really think I fit in to the program in that sense, as I see myself as “being a bit on the slacker side of the program, because I switched into the major stream this year,” from the sub-specialized program, which was more intense. I find that people who are doing the major stream are just less intense about being in the program and are better-rounded academically. I have a housemate who is also in the same stream. She “is taking all sorts of language classes, and she is loving it. I think the major stream is a way for us to get the Life Science experience, but in a less intense package.”

I’m also minoring in Gender Studies. It’s “funny because in my Life Science classes there are more Asians than are in my Gender Studies classes- often I am the only one... the program is really White.” I don’t really see “as many cultures represented as I would necessarily like” but at the same time I think that statistically it’s not true; “there aren’t more White people, but I don’t know why” it feels like there are. I think taking Gender Studies classes “brought a lot of these issues out,” because every class is an examination of privilege, racism, and gender. There are times now “when I just notice things and wonder if people are actually doing something because they think they should be doing it, or because they actually want to do it.”

I feel that being in a university setting “magnifies assumptions, because there are so many people and you obviously don’t have time to talk to everyone, and you just automatically make assumptions about certain
groups of people, Faculties, organizations.” There is a lot of stuff around about how everyone thinks that Queen’s is so “White, even though it is not. You don’t get the sense that a whole campus is White if it is not White, it means that something is making it seem that way.” Things like equity initiatives can work, “if they take into account what the racialized or minority groups think.”

Right now, there is all the AMS and ASUS election things that are coming up. “A lot of [the candidates] are talking about making equity one of their big concerns... I feel like that is such a joke because the Henry Report” was so many years ago, and “nothing has really changed since then. I don’t have a very hopeful outlook for equity at Queen’s.” If we don’t take into account the diverse views, “I don’t think you can make any progress... you keep going back to the same ideas that are proposed by the same people... I would like to see some minority group[s] actually represented by the student body; someone who doesn’t have the experience of Whiteness. Because there is a difference between knowing it, and experiencing it.”

**Reflections on the interview.**

April is someone who may look Cantonese-Canadian, but does not identify by her racial identity. Rather, she perceives herself as someone who volunteers in the community, or as someone who is a synchronized swimmer. She does not connect to her university experience in terms of involvement in Faculty-related events, and really sets herself apart from someone who can be viewed as being a typically Asian girl. She also shies away from associations with people who strongly identify themselves as Asian,
because she does not feel the same way towards the culture, or towards religion as many of the people that she was meeting once she came to Queen’s.

April is also someone who is establishing her identity separate from one that conforms to most parental expectations. April feels that there is more to life than just academics, and feels fortunate in that, although her parents provide her with guidance and support, she is also free to make her own decisions about her academic path, unlike many of her contemporaries. She is more interested in being a well-rounded person, rather than a student whose focus on academics is strictly confined to a single discipline. She wants to learn about different things, from different subject areas, and be involved in the community outside of school. She doesn’t feel the need to make an overwhelming number of social ties, and rather surrounds herself with a close network of people who mutually support one another.

Monica

At the time of the interview, Monica was a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Global Development Studies program at Queen’s. A tall, Black woman of East-African origin, we had become acquainted when she was doing a presentation on her experience working on a development project in Uganda. We immediately took a liking to one another. She was a most enthusiastic participant in the interview and in my research in general. As a result, we had a great rapport during the course of the interview.

The interview took place just prior to Reading Week, and despite all the other pulls on her time, Monica was open, thoughtful, and measured in her responses to my questions. She was not concerned about the length of the interview. If she felt that she
couldn’t answer a question at the time, she had no hesitation in telling me so; her responses were sincere and considered. My interview with Monica was probably the most informative of my interviews, possibly because it was my last one in the series, but also because of her enthusiasm for participating and sharing.

Monica’s parents immigrated to Canada from Uganda. Monica was born in Nova Scotia after their immigration. Her parents moved to Ottawa when she was 2 years old, and it is to this city that she returns on her visits home from Kingston. Monica attended Catholic school in an upper-middle class area of Ottawa, and spoke English at home, although her parents also speak Luganda, which is one of the languages spoken in Uganda.

**Personal identity.**

I think of myself as an “African-American... woman of colour.” My racial identity is influenced by my skin colour, because it is not something that you can avoid. Culturally, I would say that I am “Canadian, but I also like to say, even though I wasn’t born in Uganda... I have my roots in Uganda for sure.” I don’t think that there is any difference between my racial identity and my cultural identity; they “are the same.” If I were to describe myself, I would say that I was “African-American” and really “so proud to be Ugandan, I just love it and I love to embrace that.” I am also happy and “proud to be Canadian too... I am just so thankful for my parents and the opportunity that they took. They just left everything that they had and gave this thing a chance.”

When I am at school, I have to be “away from my family in Ottawa, and away from extended family in Uganda,” which makes me “want to try
and retain as much of it as I can.” I have become more grounded in my identity as a Black, Ugandan, Canadian woman, “more prideful. I am not ashamed, not that I was before, but I have become more proud to be from Ottawa” and from Uganda. So many people around me are from Toronto. I very much enjoy being able to say that I am not from Toronto, I am from Ottawa, and I am from “Africa, but Africa is not a country, [it] is a continent—I’m from Uganda, which is a country in Africa.” People who are around me know that “I am from Uganda, and people who know me, know that Uganda is not a city and Africa is not a country!”

Being Ugandan is very much about family ties. “Even though I am not there as often as I would like, when I am there, I just feel” like it is my home, “even though it is not really my home.” Uganda is not the place that I grew up, “but I would drop everything in a minute and go back if I could.” The sense of belonging when I am there is acute, “and it is just so easy to integrate myself into that lifestyle... I just feel so comfortable there, and things just make so much sense.” Uganda is very different from Canada—I think of Canada as a perfect place, where “you can have everything. I can access the Internet ... have running water that is clean. There are struggles to being in a developing country,” but I think that Uganda is great. “I would give up everything that I have [here]—my laptop, my phone... all those material things. I would give them up in two seconds to be with my family and to be in a place that I really call home.”

My strong ties to the Ugandan portion of my identity come from my family and the way I was raised. While we were growing up, my brother and
I didn’t have our culture “forced upon us,” but our parents “just kept us grounded, and we haven’t forgotten where we are from.” I didn’t even go to Uganda until I was 11, “but up until that point I was always very interested in knowing about Uganda, and we always kept in constant contact with our family [there].” Having those ties, “being in touch with them and knowing that I have cousins who are my age, and sending pictures to them… It kept those ties strong.”

Social identity.

When I finished high school, I felt like I knew who I was. I had started out and gone through building friendships and relationships with people around me, and I had friends who “were always there.” When I came to Queen’s, however, my confidence was shaken. It was a huge transition for me. “It just felt like everywhere I looked, it was all White.” It was just really weird for me. I “felt like I was by myself, [I] didn’t really have that support system” that I had had when I was going through high school. “This was like starting from the beginning.” I didn’t like the feeling of being out of place, so to get more involved I got a job on campus, and I also joined a choir, which was a lot of fun. “I guess I was just trying to find things that I was interested in and do things to keep me busy,” and having a job was really great. I was able to “meet other people in other years,” and, because of it, I “got other opportunities… it really opened doors to other things that I participated in through university.”

I have become someone who is very involved on campus. I feel that my social activities are connected to the extra-curricular activities that I
participate in. If I hadn’t had those experiences in first year that really made me get out and explore campus, I would not have been as involved with things in later years, like being the editor of an anti-oppressionist campus magazine, and also being able to direct *The Vagina Monologues*.

I have “built a lot of leadership skills and communication skills, [which] has been really good” for me. “Most of the friends that I have made have been through the activities that I have been involved in, the jobs that I have done, and you just meet people through people.” What I think is interesting is that a lot of my friends here are Jewish. When I was growing up, I don’t remember meeting anyone who was Jewish, but “when I was working in first year, the only other first year who got hired was Jewish, and all of her friends [were] Jewish, and they became my friends.” It just sort of went from there. I also have friends who are not Jewish; it is just that a significant number happen to be.

I have a lot of friends, some of whom have been in my life since I was young, “and some that come and go.” I would say that friendships have definitely influenced my identity. “I like consistency in my life [and] it is good [to] have friends who have been there for extended periods of time, but I think that even people that you don’t maintain relationships with... have influence too... for just a split second they can make you think about things,” and make an impact.

**Situational identity in academic contexts.**

When I mentioned to my mom that I was thinking of going to Queen’s, the first thing that she said to me was that it was a “racist
university. I totally laughed in her face, like ‘ha ha ha’ and said that I want to go there. I don’t think I really believed her, or understood the extent to what that meant.” My mom didn’t know why she thought of Queen’s that way, only that it had that reputation among other institutions of higher education. “I just knew that it was [considered to be] a really great university, and that good people got in. I had no idea of the history or anything related to that.”

In comparison to Queen’s, I would say that my high school was more diverse, definitely. “It felt more culturally diverse. I feel that people were more in touch with their culture... [and] there were a lot more people from different places at my school. It was very different when I came” to Queen’s. I think I felt this way because of the “circle of people that I was around [in high school]. I just remember a lot of Italians, and people from Latin America, and there seemed to be more African-American people.” I am not sure if the school was just more diverse, or if it was the “high level of engagement from people who were participating in activities.” I know we have activities and things like that here, but I don’t know, “at my school it felt like everyone wanted to get involved, and even if people weren’t doing things that specifically related” to their identity or where they were from. “People just wanted to get involved and they were really receptive to it, to engage with it and learn from each other, and it was cool.” I don’t get that sense at Queen’s or feel that people here are engaged or want to be involved in cross-cultural experiences.

One of the first things I noticed was how different it was from my high school. At the time, I didn’t know what it meant, but I had heard the
expression “culture of Whiteness.” I don’t know if this is what I would have called it in my mind at the time, but “I could feel it.” That is not to say that there is no diversity at Queen’s; I feel that I do experience diversity here. Because I am so involved in various school activities, I have made connections with people from different years, in different Faculties with different backgrounds, and I think this is how I experience diversity at Queen’s. “With respect to [making connections with] people from different cultures and different cultural backgrounds, I would have to say that I found it a bit difficult.”

The issue of diversity at Queen’s is not something that people really want to talk about. In my head it reminds me “of putting your finger in hot water, and almost getting burned... it’s kind of there” but at the same time hidden. “Then something, whenever there is an incident on campus, people feel the need to talk about it. It’s a very sensitive issue... I feel that some people are aware of its sensitivity, and then some people are blind to it.” That being said, I don’t feel that my racial identity is ever an issue, but there are times that “I question it, but it’s not my initial thought.” This might happen when I am questioning “the kind of treatment that I receive from someone,” but it is not like “every time I walk into a situation I feel that it is going to be more difficult because I am a person of colour.” If a situation arises, maybe when reflecting upon it, I might think that my skin colour had something to do with it, but it is not something that I am sensitive to all the time when at school. I like to think that the experiences that I have while at school are similar to my peers who are non-racialized. “I have never felt that
is not how things work." I don’t feel I have to identify myself differently when at Queen’s.

I count myself fortunate that I have had exposure to some amazing professors at Queen’s, specifically women of colour. They have been influential to me as role models and mentors, and the courses that they have taught have been “some of the courses that I have enjoyed the most—maybe it’s because I feel like I can relate to them, and maybe it is also because the topics that they are teaching are what I am interested in.” There is a professor in the Geography Department who teaches on the geography of the Caribbean, which is where she is from. I always enjoyed that she was teaching about “where she was from, and it stimulated the interest in me to learn more about Uganda and to study that while I am at school too.” I think professors sharing their experiences with their students “really brings awareness to what is going on.”

Being involved with the anti-oppressionist campus magazine was another thing that really brought awareness about things that were going on at Queen’s. “To learn about the history of racism [at Queen’s]... trying to understand where people were coming from with their experiences, and what they were writing down on paper.” I found the different things that I was getting and the different perspectives, “the different ways that people experience Queen’s, because my experience is just one, but there are so many other people who experience racism at Queen’s.” It was interesting to see that there “were White people who feel like they are marginalized, there are Asian people.”
There are just so many perspectives that we don’t think about, and it was a big thing to try and see it from so many different perspectives.” I don’t feel that there are places that people can go on campus to express these things, because a lot of people “don’t know about... anti-racist initiatives on campus, or the safe spaces they can go to if they are feeling targeted.” From my work on the magazine, there are a lot of people on campus “who are feeling the same way, but they just don’t know each other and they just don’t know where to go.” I think that the publications on campus do a good job of shedding light on what is going on around campus, but nothing is really being done to change things.

I first heard of the “culture of Whiteness” in the *Journal*\(^\text{11}\). They did a special on racism on campus, I think it was in my first year, and there have been “different instances on campus where it is brought up again and again.” To be frank, what I think it means is that “there are a lot of White people on campus, and not a lot of non-White people on campus... it’s like a culture, a dominant culture, and it’s frustrating because it feels like” we are powerless as students, “because we don’t get to decide who comes to this school. You can’t just admit people based on their race—there is obviously some level of standards that need to be met,” but it makes me wonder why “non-White people are not applying to Queen’s, or why are they not getting in.”

**Reflections on the interview.**

Monica is someone who is secure in her identity as a Ugandan-Canadian woman, and uses this identity to construct herself personally, socially, and academically. She is

\(^{11}\) *The Queen’s Journal* is a student-run newspaper at Queen’s University.
not shy about sharing her identity with those around her, and does not feel that she has to adapt her identity based on the situations in which she finds herself.

Tied into her identity as a Ugandan woman are notions of family. Monica feels close to both her immediate family in Canada, but also to her family in Uganda, and would love the opportunity to live there. Although she views Canada as a “perfect place,” she really thinks of Uganda as home; she would “give up everything… to be in a place that she calls home.”

Monica is secure in her academic self, and, although she feels that Queen’s is a very White place, she does not think she is personally impacted by the situation. Upon her arrival at Queen’s, Monica felt out of place, but quickly carved out a niche for herself. Though her involvement with various initiatives on campus, such as her work with the anti-oppressionist campus magazine, Monica recognizes that there are people who have not adapted as well to the Queen’s environment; however, she has not become someone who questions every negative exchange that occurs to her as being a result of her skin colour. Monica experiences agency when she is at school; she is not someone who is passive about the academic experience, but rather is someone who makes the most of each learning opportunity as it presents itself. She is inspired by other women of colour who are on faculty, and uses her identity as a racialized woman as a source of empowerment.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The topic of this thesis was selected to provide insight into the experiences of self-identified racialized female students at Queen’s University. Specifically, participants spoke of their experiences with their personal identity, their social identity, and their situational identity within academic contexts. In this chapter, I have taken my participants’ experiences and connected them with previous literature. I also discuss the complexities of my research, and some of the difficulties I had with connecting the experiences of my participants with the literature. I follow up this discussion by outlining some of the limitations of this study and recommendations to alleviate these limitations in future research, along with suggestions for future practice. I conclude my thesis with my final thoughts on the study.

Examination of Major Themes

Personal identity.

The four participants in my study discussed their personal identity and how this identity shaped them as individuals. Participants gave voice to their families, their cultural upbringing, and how influences to which they were exposed among their family groups shaped them into the individuals that they were today. Further to their stories about personal identity were stories of shared or denied cultural heritage, with all participants identifying with their ‘Canadian-ness’ to varying degrees. The depth of participation and cultural maintenance for each participant thus played a role in her personal biography at the time of the interviews.
Of the group, it was Teresa who identified most strongly with her ‘Canadian-ness’ and did not consider herself to have any cultural identity beyond this one. She attributed this fact to her upbringing and her parents, who did not reinforce any religious or cultural traditions in her household when she was growing up. In her household, education, and not cultural maintenance, was considered to be the ultimate goal. Linguistic maintenance was also not important, as Teresa and her brother grew up speaking only English. The few artefacts of her grandparents’ religious tradition found in her parents’ home very much underscored the importance of education. She credits her family as being a strong influence on the person that she is today, because their passion for social justice has translated itself to her identity.

In contrast, Amara was not so definitive about how she saw herself, and stated that it was aspects of both her Canadian identity as well as her identity as an Ismaili that influenced her. Amara shared stories about how, as a Muslim woman, her identity was influenced by her parents and her upbringing, and how from her family she learned important values and cultural traditions. She was proud of the fact that she could speak the language of her parents, and thought that her cultural background allowed her to be whoever she wanted to be, without restriction. Amara had a wealth of cultural knowledge, both as a Canadian and as a Muslim, that she could draw upon that did not force her to choose what her identity was. However, she sensed that those outside of her family group did not see things this way, and that sometimes her ethnicity was a barrier to understanding that she did not know how to overcome. She described herself as two people—the person she was when at home with her family, and the person that she became away from her family influences.
April clearly saw herself as bridging two worlds, the Cantonese world of her parents and the Canadian world within which she grew up and with which she allied herself strongly. She was not confused about her identity; it was more that she enjoyed doing things that fell outside of the typical purview of the expectations of women of Chinese descent. Although she could speak Cantonese, and grew up engaging in activities that are seen as being typically Chinese, such as going to math classes and piano lessons, April commented that she didn’t really enjoy “Chinese” activities. Since coming to university, April had more agency over her life, and the direction that she wanted to go in, as her parents were removed from the process due to distance. Her family still stressed the importance of education above all else, but for April part of the process of becoming herself was to be a well-rounded individual, rather than a one-dimensional person whose identity could be gleaned from physical appearance alone.

Monica saw her personal identity as a blend of her cultural heritage as a Ugandan woman, and as a Black Canadian woman. She balanced these two aspects of her identity, and found them reinforced through interactions both with her immediate family as well as her extended family. She certainly found that her identity was influenced by her skin colour, but did not consider that her skin colour had a major impact on how she was perceived by those who surrounded her. Instead, her skin colour was just one more aspect of her identity. Her cultural identity was not forced upon her by her parents when growing up, but rather was encouraged and nurtured when she showed an interest in knowing more about life in Uganda.

Previous literature on personal identity indicates that family plays a large role in influencing personal identity (Buechler, 2008). The notion of family groups as being
crucial reference points for racialized individuals (Alcoff, 2006) is visible with the four participants whom I interviewed in that my participants further identified their parents as being these reference points. All participants saw their parents as being a formative influence on the people that they were to varying degrees. Amara, Teresa, and Monica expressed strong ties to their families when they were interviewed, and discussed how their parents instilled in them solid values and judgement as they were growing up. April addressed how she was influenced by her parents when she was growing up in terms of activities with which she was involved and academic choices. During the interview, neither April nor Teresa addressed their families perspectives on cultural maintenance.

In the study conducted by Phinney, Romero, Nava, and Huang (2003), the researchers felt that the personal identities of students from immigrant backgrounds “involved both the culture of origin and the culture of the new country” (p. 135). However, among my participants, there seemed to be little in the way of a melding of the two cultures. Although all of my participants were the children of immigrants, not all of the parents practiced cultural maintenance with their children. As well, while the Phinney et al. study addressed native language acquisition as an important factor in establishing a personal ethnic identity, for my participants, knowledge of the native language was not a predictor of the strength of their ethnic identity. Two of my participants indicated that they spoke their parents’ language within the home; Amara and April respectively. Yet, only Amara identified with her ethnic identity.

Additionally, the ethnicity of the primary familial group is seen as being the most significant identifier throughout the lifecourse (Alcoff, 2006), but in my interviews I found that this was not always the case. Two of my participants, Monica and Amara,
showed a high level of ethnic identity, and specifically included ethnic nomenclature when referring to themselves. They were both proud to be Canadian, and also to belong to their respective ethnic groups. In contrast, Teresa and April did not consider themselves to have an ethnicity beyond Canadian. Teresa expressed that she had no ethnic identity, because she did not grow up with cultural or religious influences other than the ones to which she was exposed in her White, middle-class neighbourhood in the Greater Toronto Area. For April, ethnic constructions were vaguer. Others could view her as Cantonese-Canadian, but she herself distanced herself from the Cantonese aspect of her identity—she did not think that it was a part of her “lifestyle.” April did not take anything from her Chinese heritage, and, like Teresa, stated that the pursuit of education was of primary importance when she was growing up.

**Social identity.**

Identities that are grounded in race, gender, religion, or social status are all examples of social identities (Buechler, 2008). All of my participants experienced these identities; however, they did not directly address issues of their social identity construction with regards to these specific areas. Instead, my participants interpreted their social identities as related to their choices and constructions of self within the social world that they occupied, and how they selected and interacted with peer groups.

Teresa saw herself as being a non-conformist, someone who tried to establish her identity outside of mainstream society and its expectations. She was drawn to like-others, both during her secondary schooling, as well as after coming to Queen’s. She established friendships with people who would not reinforce the status quo. In our conversation, she identified how, after coming to Queen’s, she made friends with mature students because
she perceived that they would be more resistant to the “cookie-cutter transformation” that she felt happened to people who found themselves in an atmosphere reflective of “White privilege.” Teresa did not want to be viewed as a typically south-Asian female, and although she had friends within this community, she herself did not experience belonging within the community; she had no cultural ties to this background, and believed that these ties were a necessary component of membership within the community. She also did not see a need to belong to racially divided clubs or organizations. Her biggest passion was social justice, and for her this passion could not be served through clubs that were divided along colour lines.

Similarly, April did not see herself as meeting the expectations of a typical Cantonese-Canadian girl. Although during her high school experiences she had identified with other students who shared a similar racial background as she, upon coming to university, April found that she could not relate to the Chinese students that she met here. She found people in her Life Sciences program to be too “stereo-typically Asian.” She did not want to be viewed in this way, and hence found friends and activities at Queen’s, that, according to her, most Asian girls did not like to do. Their values and the activities in which they engaged did not interest her, and she did not find herself identifying socially with them due to a lack of shared interests. Instead, April decided to go in another direction when finding friends at Queen’s. Through her newly discovered love of synchronized swimming, April made friends who shared similar interests as herself. As she liked to be unique, she enjoyed being one of the only Asian women at synchronized swimming competitions.
In her secondary school experiences, Amara found that there was a high level of discrimination against the “coloured kids”; as a result, she found it easier to stick to “her own kind.” Her desire to befriend peers who were ethnically similar to herself changed somewhat when she went to a private school, but, at Queen’s, Amara’s social world had two dimensions: one in which her friends and the organizations to which she belonged were part of her ethno-cultural background; and another where she tried to assimilate her cultural identity to fit what was more “normal.” Amara related best to clubs and organizations at Queen’s that spoke to her racial heritage, and connected her culture with the social activities she was involved with at Queen’s. It was socially easier for her to be around the people that she met through these activities, because she did not have to constantly face assumptions about what it meant to be a Muslim woman. In her relationships outside of her ethno-cultural group, Amara engaged in behaviours, such as drinking, to fit in with her peers and their expectations.

Monica was secure in her identity upon graduating from her secondary school. She had built a strong network of supportive friends, and people with whom to identify, but upon coming to Queen’s she was lost. She looked around, and felt as though she were the only Black person on campus. Queen’s was not as diverse a place as her high school had been, and she missed having friends from different backgrounds and cultures. Finding diversity at Queen’s became one of her challenges. She found this diversity through making connections with people who were in other years of study, and in different programs. Through working with the AMS (Alma Mater Society, Queen’s undergraduate governing body), Monica built a social network, and her positive secondary school experiences gave Monica the confidence to fully express her identity as
a Ugandan woman without compromise. Although she saw herself as being a minority on campus, Monica built a vast network of peers through her involvement at Queen’s; she became a visible face at campus events, as a participant and as a supporter of her friends. For Monica, the people she meets socially have “definitely influenced [her] identity” and impacted her as an individual.

All of my participants expressed the fact that, other than their parents, their friends had also influenced their identity, which is consistent with the literature (Buechler, 2008). To varying degrees, participants spoke of how there came a time that, although their parents were very significant in their lives, their friends and peer groups had more currency with regards to influencing their identities. Buechler also states that there comes a time when individuals feel that their friends understand them more than their parents, and it is at this time that these individuals begin to form new primary groups.

Identity is constructed within a social framework, and hence all identity can be viewed as social (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). The frameworks of which my participants spoke were all different, and relational, but they all had one thing in common—their association with like-peers. With regards to individuals from racialized backgrounds, the literature defines like-peers as being individuals who are ethnically or racially similar to the respondent in question (Phinney et al., 2003). These like-peers are an important factor in preserving ethnic identity. Amongst my participants, however, I found that like-peers were not always from the ethnic or racial group of the participant, and that they served different purposes.
Amara was the participant who most closely echoed the literature with regard to how she perceived her like-peers (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). She stated that it was easier for her to be around people who shared a similar ethno-cultural background, so that she did not always have to be on the defensive about the Muslim aspect of her identity. It was an important part of Amara’s identity to be around people who shared her heritage, which allowed her to maintain aspects of her culture when away from home. April also spoke of having ethnically similar peers when she was in high school, but found that at university she did not identify with people who shared her ethnicity.

April and Teresa discussed how disconnected they felt from their ethno-cultural group, and how they didn’t belong with people at Queen’s who shared their skin colour or features. Instead, they defined like-peers as people who shared the same interests as they did; in April’s case this interest was synchronized swimming, and for Teresa it was social justice issues. They wanted to be perceived by those around them according to the things that they did, rather than by external factors. Monica, who wanted to find a community of like-peers, was ultimately disappointed by the demographic make-up of Queen’s. Her brief flirtation with a club that was comprised of people of African heritage failed to work out. The club had little room for her experiences because most of the people involved identified as Caribbean, and she was made to feel like an outsider because her family was from Uganda.

Although ethno-culturally and racially similar peers allowed Amara to maintain her cultural ties when away from home, my other participants did not express a similar need, or tried and failed to have this need met, as in the case of Monica. For April and Teresa, like-peers served to reinforce their distance from their perceived cultural or racial
communities. Their like-peers were people who shared the same interests or goals, and the ethno-cultural group to which these peers belonged was of little consequence.

The literature also addresses the issue of cultural assimilation, the process by which racialized individuals become part of the dominant White culture (hooks, 1992; Lewis & Bell, 2006; Williams, 1991). Internalized racism is one process of assimilation, and although none of my participants voiced issues of internalized racism, they did address the issue of assimilation. Of my participants, April most keenly displayed the desire to assimilate. She did not want to be seen as a typical Asian girl, and engaged in activities that she perceived as being White-dominant in nature, such as synchronized swimming. April received personal satisfaction in being involved in “un-Asian” activities, and personally could not relate to the Asian people that she had met while at Queen’s. Being around Asian people went counter to the type of life that she was establishing away from her parents.

Teresa also was not connected to her South Asian roots, but for her this lack of connection was because her parents had not stressed religion or culture in the home while she was growing up. Because she had no personal connection to any Indian identity, Teresa found friends who shared the same interests and passions as her. Instead of a specific ethno-cultural group with which to affiliate, she allied herself with minorities in a more abstract self—those who were marginalized (Williams, 1991). Amara spoke of times that she engaged in more mainstream behaviours to fit in, so as to challenge the stereotypes that her identification as a Muslim woman might trigger in people (Williams). In direct contrast, Monica believed that she had no need to compromise her identity as a Black woman, and that she did not think that she had to assimilate to belong.
For these individuals, construction of social identities reflected many issues that were not specifically addressed in the literature. Each participant had her own story to tell, and her own reasons for how her social world was selected and shaped, not always falling along ethno-cultural lines. Issues of assimilation were also addressed, but not all participants spoke to these issues, and, when they did, did not find them to be critical for their identity construction.

**Situational identity.**

Individuals have many facets to their identity, and not all facets are expressed all of the time (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). My participants spoke of how they tempered their identity in academic contexts, and also of how their previous academic situations influenced them when at Queen’s.

Of my participants, Teresa was the only one who had attended another post-secondary institution prior to coming to Queen’s. Teresa’s experiences while at Queen’s were distinct from those at her undergraduate university. She indicated that the demographic makeup of Queen’s was similar to that of her secondary school. Queen’s was a very “White, rich place” where Teresa was often prejudged based on her appearance. She found it frustrating to be asked if she spoke English, “just on the basis of the colour of [her] skin.” There was also a lot of pressure from within her program to conform to the image of what a typical graduate student should be, and the type of research they should want to conduct. Teresa had a lifetime of experience in trying to avoid being moulded into a stereotype, and Queen’s was very much about creating “cookie-cutter” people. Within the context in her program, with all these expectations being placed upon her, it was not always possible to be a strong minority. Instead, Teresa
had to negotiate the cultural landscape at Queen’s carefully—she had to be careful about what she said and to whom she said it. Negotiating her situational identity made her feel as though she were walking on eggshells.

In her later secondary school experiences, Amara was pretty much the only “brown” student in the school. It seemed taboo to point out her racial identity in this context, and assimilation to the dominant culture was reinforced. Amara felt much the same way in most contexts at Queen’s, and described feeling like an outsider to certain classrooms, because she did not have the same cultural knowledge as the White students in the class. Because of her religious orientation, Amara sensed that she was singled out, and that she always had to be on the defensive to fight assumptions about what it meant to be a Muslim woman. Amara experienced the atmosphere on campus as being exclusive, but still tried to participate in activities and events, even though at times she was helpless in the face of constant assumptions from those around her.

April’s previous experiences with schooling were mostly positive, with encouraging teachers within an academic-focused environment. At Queen’s she was a Life Sciences student, a program that really seemed to foster learning-focused students whom she described as being mostly Asian. April didn’t fit into the program in that sense, because although she looked Asian, she wanted to distance herself from this aspect of herself as much as possible. She didn’t want to be seen as being typically Asian, as she was not an overly-focused learner. She found more value in having a more well-rounded education, and went into the Major stream of the Life Sciences program, in order to take courses in different Faculties, and minor in Gender Studies. In Gender Studies, April found that she could disconnect herself from living the Asian stereotype, often being the
only Asian student in class. Her Gender Studies classes also brought to light issues surrounding the lack of diversity and inclusion within the Queen’s context, although April did not really sense that these issues impacted her specifically.

When Monica announced to her mother that she was going to be attending Queen’s for university, the first thing that her mother said to her was that it was a “racist university.” When she got here, Monica discovered that the atmosphere was very different from her high school. At some point in her time as a Queen’s student, she had heard the expression “culture of Whiteness.” When reflecting upon her early days on campus, she thought this phrase best encapsulated her thoughts after coming here. According to Monica, people on campus didn’t discuss issues of diversity. As a Black woman, Monica didn’t believe that her racial identity was called into question during most of her interactions on campus; sometimes it was at the back of her mind as a possible issue, but she did not want to acknowledge it as such.

The literature addresses how context-based assumptions influence the expressed identity of individuals (Alcoff, 2006). My participants all came to Queen’s having previously lived in large urban centres, with a greater degree of diversity than the Queen’s campus, which is situated in a small Eastern Ontario city. My participants’ experiences at Queen’s were more insular, and, because of the demographics of the university, most were considered racial minorities within their program. The only exception to this program minority status was April, who identified that she was in a program that was dominated by Asian students.

Post-secondary institutions are characterized by the fact that people come into contact with too many other individuals to encounter them all singly, and assumptions
about others get made based on external facts, such as skin colour (Alcoff, 2006). Teresa spoke of how she was perceived to be a South Asian woman based on external signifiers, even though internally she did not experience any relationship with such an identity construct. This perception of her by others, however, influenced how she expressed her identity based on the context. Amara discussed how, in her classes, gross stereotypes about Islam and Muslim identity were perpetuated; people wanted to know why her head was not covered if she was a Muslim woman. According to April, being a Life Sciences student was “living the [Asian] stereotype.” Monica was the only participant who stated that she didn’t think that she was not treated any differently by those around her based on her race. She later elaborated on this statement by saying that she could not just assume that everything negative that happened to her occurred as a result of her skin colour; to do so would severely impact her functioning with those around her. For my other participants, it was difficult, if not impossible, to challenge external assumptions that were based on their appearance.

The literature asserts that identity is recognized in North American contexts only when it is the identity of the dominant group. Racialized individuals need to prove that they have the requisite knowledge to function as members of mainstream society, and achievement forms that are linked to the dominant society are privileged over other forms (Tyler et al., 2006). To have identity acknowledged within North American contexts, racialized individuals need to prove that they can fit in, in contrast with their White counterparts who need not provide such proof (Alcoff, 2006; hooks, 1992; Williams, 1991). While none of my participants specifically expressed views that would confirm or deny this vein of thinking, Amara indicated how sometimes she felt outside to certain
classrooms and certain spaces. She claimed that this feeling arose due to topics that were discussed in classes, or due to the population of the class itself. Teresa also expressed that there were times that she could not give her opinions in class for fear of having them labelled or dismissed because of her perceived identity.

The concept of intersectionality (Blume & DeReus, 2009) was specifically expressed by both Amara and April, to varying degrees. Kalsi (2003) also addresses the notion of biculturalism when looking at situational identities of racialized individuals. Amara spoke of how she expressed her identity differently depending upon the context, at times activating her ethno-cultural identity, and at other times speaking in her Canadian voice depending on how she was viewed within the class. April discussed how the only time she activated her Cantonese identity was when she was at home with her parents, and that at school she expressed only her Canadian self. All of my participants sensed that they were sometimes looked upon as the “experts” when discussing things that allowed for diverse viewpoints. The assumption arose because, as they looked a certain way, they must have access to specialized knowledge.

Summary

The use of an inductive approach for this thesis allowed for a great deal of flexibility in allowing my participants to decide what the scope of the data was to be. Using the voices of my participants to find significance in the data freed me from using a pre-existing theory that may have forced me to ignore issues of significance that were discussed in the interviews by my participants. I was able to use the transcripts from my interviews as a raw source of information, and through interpolation across the different
participants, construct a structure that shaped and moulded my thesis as it emerged. The categories that emerged through this process, although initially fluid, gradually took on a shape and stability that wound its way through the rest of the thesis.

The literature around identity is organized upon the different facets of identity, and how identity is both a social construct and a relational one. By consulting with previous literature, I came to realize that the units that I had used in my initial organization also had links in existing research. Previous research on identity has used the discrete categories of personal identity, social identity, and situational identity. The categories that I had come to on my own, using the data sets of my participants as a guide, had independently guided me to results similar to the literature. However, because of the process I used, I was confident that I had used as much of the information that my participants had given me as possible. The experiences of my participants guided me in such a way so as there were great parallels between what they said, and the literature that I eventually used to give more weight to this study.

Identity seems to be a construct that has neatly defined borders between the different areas, at least according to the framework that I was using for my analysis; however, this framework was not as easy to navigate as it had appeared to be when I constructed my preliminary literature review. Upon completion, I set upon the task of crafting the profiles of my participants, and shedding light on my findings in light of the literature that I had examined. Other than a few areas of overlap, the process seemed to be a straightforward one. Yet when I undertook to do my analysis, I began to doubt the task that was before me. When earlier everything seemed to fit into a neat category, the analysis revealed that identity was really fluid and dynamic, there were shifting
interpretations of what identity meant, and the different types of identity were expressed in various ways. Previous empirical studies that were qualitative in nature were few, and I began to understand why previous research in this area was mostly limited to quantitative studies. Quantitative research does not allow for in-depth exploration of the variability of response in the five-point Likert scale—the reasons for one person’s response may be different from others, but on paper one person's response of “5” is the same as another’s and can be analyzed as such. On the other hand, my study was looking to understand the experiences of my participants, and there was great variability in their words, and their interpretations of the questions. This variability meant that, although the literature had an understanding of what personal, social, and situational identity were, often the individual had a different idea of how these concepts were constructed. This variability made the task of analysis a challenging one.

When I started this research, I had one main question that drove me in this work—how did self-identified racialized female students negotiate their identities and understand themselves within the White-dominant post-secondary setting at Queen’s University? Using an inductive approach, I retold their stories of how they viewed themselves as individuals in the Queen’s landscape. They spoke of their personal identities, and the families that shaped these identities. They spoke of their friends, and how they chose and maintained friendships based on elements of their personal identities. Lastly, they spoke of their situational identities, not just at Queen’s, but in their previous academic contexts. These contextual identities tied their social and personal identities together, which came to light further as my analysis progressed. The question of how they negotiated their identities was fraught with more complexity than it seemed on
initial inspection, and ultimately there was no one way that these individuals negotiated their identity. The process of identity construction within the White-dominant context of Queen’s University was one that for my participants was negotiated on an individual basis, depending on the complex interplay of their various identities, and how they were activated based on the contexts that they found themselves within. Despite literature, such as the Henry Report (2006), that situates the Queen’s campus as a space that reinforces a culture of White hegemony, none of my participants identified this culture as having a significant impact on their construction of identity.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Three limitations may have influenced this study: limitations that might help focus future research. The first limitation relates to the lack of empirical literature in this area; the second addresses my choice of data collection strategies; and the third concerns my own bias as a researcher.

The exploration of racialized students and their experiences within White-dominant academic contexts has mostly been limited to the K-12 educational system. Within the post-secondary context, the literature is sparse and mainly consists of a few large-scale quantitative studies situated within the American context. A lack of literature limited my own research in that I could not use previous studies and their methodology as a guide for my own work. By conducting this study, I hope that I have added to the paucity of research in this area, and that future researchers will be able to use my work to further explore experiences of racialized students within the Canadian post-secondary context.
My data collection protocol required only that I conduct one interview with each participant, with the potential for a follow-up interview. While I found the amount of data collected to be more than adequate for the purposes of my study, there may have been more issues that could have been teased out if I had given my participants a chance to interact with one another. This strategy would have potentially increased the depth of my data, by allowing me to contrast the personal narratives of my participants with their public dialogues. Future researchers should take into account some of these considerations when forming their studies, as, although there is great merit to learning from participants’ stories, there may also be merit in listening to what is said, and what is omitted, in group discussion.

My final limitation was a result of my own bias, and to what extent I was projecting my own feelings as a researcher onto the words of my participants. I was careful to study transcripts and audio recordings thoroughly to have an understanding of what my participants said, but also how they said it, but it is impossible to know if my own experiences colour my work. Future researchers need to be aware that this is a danger when conducting this type of study and to take measures to alleviate any researcher bias that may exist. As well, a team of researchers from varying backgrounds could tackle the research collaboratively.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on my extensive reading of the literature and the experiences of my four participants, I recommend that Queen’s, and other universities with similarly expressed problems of inclusivity, seek to address the needs of these students. It is only by creating
and opening dialogue with students of colour that their experiences can be brought to the forefront. Assumptions around race need to be discussed directly, rather than subsumed by the dominant culture. The culture of difference needs to be given a space on university campuses. The current campus culture at Queen’s does not seem to promote inclusiveness in any form other than through assimilation, but assimilation goes counter to constructions of inclusivity. That being said, however, it is difficult to actually make specific recommendations about what can be done to reshape the campus culture at Queen’s. In my interviews, my participants made some suggestions for change, but these suggestions were based on their individual experiences, and their individual needs. It is too complex to enforce change based on the needs of a few, because individual needs are often different from group needs; however, these suggestions can always be used as a starting point to think about initiating change.

For Teresa, the climate at Queen’s was one that exemplified White privilege, because there was no space for visible celebration of cultural events. For her, if you “facilitated that kind” of space, students would participate. Her experiences at her previous university were ones of walking through the student centre and seeing a Sikh dance going on, and just being surrounded by spaces in which diversity was allowed to flourish. For her, many of the problems of White privilege at Queen’s could be alleviated by giving other cultures more visible space amongst the university landscape. Monica also shared the same attitudes as Teresa, and spoke of how inclusive the space at her secondary school was towards diversity, and how at Queen’s people “just didn’t seem that engaged” in getting to know about differences.
Amara spoke of experiences with being marginalized because of her skin colour right after coming to Queen’s, but as time passed, she found herself “getting used to it.” Although more dialogue had been opened up on campus about the culture of Whiteness, too much discussion around the subject tended to “make [White] people feel too guilty.” The discussions then started to trickle off, and nothing really happened. Amara did not think that things could be done to change this attitude; it was too deeply entrenched in the school’s culture.

April basically agreed with Amara, in that she didn’t believe that anything could change on campus unless people brought issues of diversity and colour out into the open. For her, to alleviate the current campus climate, racialized students needed to be the ones who were given a voice in suggesting what changes needed to be made. She did not have suggestions for what these changes could be. As someone who only had one more year left at Queen’s, she didn’t care enough to make a difference; however, she thought that having more racialized individuals in student government could be a step towards a more inclusive campus environment.

**Final Thoughts**

As a racialized student who was questioning how my own identity was constructed, I thought my research would allow me to gain insight into how my own identity was shaped. By listening to the stories of my participants, I was hoping to hear words that resonated within me, or ones that I did not relate to at all. Both were true. Listening to other women of colour share their perspectives with their cultural identity, knowledge, and experiences helped me find commonalities between their stories and my
own, but each of us had a slightly different story to tell. On the surface, we were all women of colour. We were all from large urban centres in Ontario, we all had siblings, and we were all students. These similarities, however, were superficial. Our experiences with these facets of ourselves were vastly different, and even the commonalities that we shared were relational and contextual.

This research has shown me that we are all minorities in a way, and it is not just skin colour that distinguishes us, but also our differing geographies and family histories that shape who we are. Everyone experiences racialization at some point, and although in this thesis, Whiteness is viewed negatively, it is not meant to be presented thusly. There is no issue with having your identity align with the majority of society, just as there should be no issues with aligning your identity with smaller segments of society. All spaces that humans occupy have dominant cultures. It is when dominant cultures demand assimilation from the minority that the problem occurs.

Undertaking this research also gave me the opportunity to gain tremendous insight into the complexities of the research process. My topic, which had seemed so straightforward at the beginning of my study, became a complex and tangled web from which, by the end, I was struggling to extricate myself with some kind of timely efficiency. I also discovered that it is not possible to grasp the extent of identity, my own or of others. Identity is a complex construction that makes us who we are. Self is always changing, depending on both our contexts and our experiences. I did learn that there are certain basic social constructions that shape how we are actors in our worlds—our race and our gender. As a woman of South Asian origin, regardless of the fact that I am Canadian, my gender and my race will always play a role in how I am perceived by
people around me, and they in turn will impact how I act as a member of society. My physical characteristics don’t change, but depending on the circumstances in which I find myself, my relations with those around me do. If I were in the middle of a market in Delhi, I would behave and be perceived differently than if I were at a beach in the south of France, which would be different than if I were in a classroom at Queen’s. All of these contexts activate behaviours and expectations. In the same way as I change my clothing to match a situation (swimsuit for the beach but not the marketplace or classroom), I also change my identity to adapt to situations. The same body wears the different contextually-appropriate costumes, although underneath them I am still the same basic Simren.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Notice

Participants Needed

Are you a woman 25 years of age or younger, and do you self-identify as a racialized (visible) minority? Have you lived in Canada for at least five years, and attended at least one year of full-time post-secondary studies at Queen’s University? If so, then you may be a perfect candidate for a research study on the experiences of female racialized post-secondary students. I am presently looking for participants to take part in an individual interview on their experiences as racialized (minority) students within the university context. If you feel that you would be interested, please contact simren_trehin@yahoo.com for more information with no obligation.
Appendix B: Letter of Information

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Exploring cultural constructions of racialized students in post-secondary education

I am writing to request your participation in research aimed at furthering the understanding of female racialized (visible minority) post-secondary students and their experiences in negotiating cultural identity. The ultimate goal of my research is to understand how cultural identities are constructed and expressed within a white-dominant cultural context, specifically the post-secondary context. I am a student in the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University, working on a thesis to complete the requirements for an M.Ed. This research has been cleared by the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board.

Individual Interview

I wish to document the views that racialized students have with regards to their own construction of identity within their post-secondary context. If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview that will be 90 minutes in length at a place and time of your choosing. I may also perform a follow-up 15-minute interview to discuss common themes presented during the course of interviews.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone. In the event that any questions are upsetting to you, as they may deal with personal and culturally sensitive information, you may chose not to answer, or withdraw from the study. I will also provide information regarding ethnically sensitive counselling services available at Queen’s University (e.g., Human Rights Office). You are free to withdraw from the study without reasons at any point, by contacting the researcher at the information provided below, and you may request removal of all or part of your data. Data will be destroyed immediately.

This research may result in publications of various types, including my master’s thesis, journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, and books. Your name will not be attached to any form of the data that you provide; neither will your name be known to anyone tabulating or analyzing the data, nor will these appear in any publication created as a result of this research. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Simren Trehin at 613-929-6464, email: 6st21@queensu.ca, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,
Simren Trehin; M.Ed Candidate, 2010
Appendix C: Consent Form

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning “Exploring cultural constructions of racialized students in post-secondary education,” and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study.

I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. My confidentiality will be protected to the extent possible. I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact Simren Trehin at 613-929-6464, email: 6st21@queensu.ca, or her supervisor, John Freeman, 613-533-6000, ext. 77298, email: freemanj@queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, email: chair.GREB@queensu.ca.

I agree to:

(b) Participate in an audio recorded 90 minute individual interview YES ___ NO ___

Initials ______

and

(c) Participate in an audio-recorded 15-minute follow-up interview YES ___ NO ___

Initials ______

Participant’s Name (please print): ________________________________

Participant’s Signature ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

Please write your e-mail and/or postal address at the bottom of this sheet so I am able to contact you with your interview transcripts and to provide you with study results.

e-mail and/or postal address: _______________________________________

_____________________________________

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Simren Trehin. Retain the second copy for your records.
Appendix D: Interview Guide

If you want me to stop the recording or if a question is too sensitive, please let me know. Before we begin I want to remind you that everything you say is confidential and that your name will never be attached to anything you say again.

1) So just to get started, can you give me a little background information about yourself, where you grew up maybe, things like that?

2) How do you understand diversity, how would you define diversity personally? What is diversity?
   a. As an undergraduate who identifies herself as racialized, how do you understand diversity at Queen’s?
   b. What is your impression of diversity at Queen’s?
   c. How did your perceptions of diversity at Queen’s impact your decision to come here (if relevant)?

3) You identified yourself as a racialized person. Can you provide more details about what that racial identity is? (2nd gen, immigrant, etc.)
   a. How do you identify yourself racially/culturally/ethnically
   b. In what ways do you do this?
   c. How do you feel you connect with other racialized individuals who may or may not be a part of the group with which you identify yourself? (Shared experiences, similarly disadvantaged, we all face racism at some point, certain groups are more disadvantaged/advantaged, perceptions of “outsiders.”)

4) As a person who identifies herself as _________ how do you perceive (see tab for cues) your involvement in the Queen’s community?
   a. How is your community involved?
   b. Are you involved? What kinds of things are you involved in/do you not take part in?
   c. Are these things that you do with your friends? Did you make friends through this activity?
   d. Has this (positively/negatively) impacted your involvement at Queen’s? In what ways?

5) Tell me about experiences you have had as a racialized student at Queen’s.
   a. In what ways are these experiences different/similar to your peers who are not members of the racialized community?
   b. How are these experiences different/similar to your peers who are members of the racialized community (if they express having such peers)
   c. As a member of ___ (racialized group) do you identify yourself differently when you are among the queen’s community?
d. Or when you are at home?

6) How do you perceive yourself?
   a. Can you describe the different facets of your identity, beyond your racialized identity
   b. How do you identify yourself (mother, career, singular labels)?

7) How do you feel this identification takes place?

8) Does your identification change in different situations?
   a. What things are different? (language, etc)
   b. If the same—why do you think this is the case? (same peer groups, etc).
   c. How do you feel you fit in at Queen’s?

9) How would you describe the campus culture/climate?
   a. Has this shaped and impacted your identity? How do you feel is has/has not?
   b. Can you provide me with examples of this?

Is there anything else that you would like to elaborate on?

Are there any comments or questions that you wish to make?