

# Snow is Only White in Our Imagination Integrating Cultural Exploration into the Learning Experience for White College Students

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## *Abstract*

America has a long history of privileging the color white. Historically racist constructs of color have often positioned “White” as the ideal and “Black” “Brown” “Red” and “Yellow” as the disdained. Whiteness is often associated with ideals of purity, cleanliness, holiness, and spotlessness (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>). Of course this type of discourse deeply damages communities of color whose racial identity is not aligned with Whiteness. But this way of thinking also damages members of White communities. Besides breeding a culture of imagined superiority, conceiving White as spotless erases the real imprint of life experience. This way of thinking actually posits White as a blank color. White can be seen as empty, colorless, bare, and plain. White has been a blank slate. But anyone that lives in a snow state knows very well that snow is only white in our imagination. When snow covers our streets it is actually colored gray as a result of its social interactions—the people that walk on it, the cars that drive through it. Life leaves its imprint on the snow. And life also leaves its imprint on people—it gives us color. So what might happen when we provide intentional and deep educational opportunities for White college students to wrestle with issues of cultural identity—to explore the life experiences that give their lives color?

## INTRODUCTION

America has a long history of privileging the color white. Historically racist constructs of color have often positioned “white” as the ideal and “black” “brown” “red” and “yellow” as the disdained. According to Scott-Kemmis’ (2009) website on color psychology, whiteness is often associated with ideals of purity, cleanliness, and holiness:

White is color at its most complete and pure, the color of perfection. The color meaning of white is purity, innocence, wholeness and completion. In color psychology white is the color of new beginnings, wiping the slate clean, so to speak. The color white is cleanliness personified, the ultimate in purity. This is why it is traditionally worn by western brides, and the reason why doctors wear white jackets... It creates a sense of order and efficiency, a great help if you need to de-clutter your life. (Scott-Kemmis, 2009, n.p.)

Some Western cultures act out the values of whiteness by aligning it with some of the most important and respected aspect of our lives—a wedding day, a doctor who we trust with our healthcare. These subtle acts form impressions and can have broader psychological effects on identity and cultural efficacy. The simple attributes that we associate with colors can often privilege those that identify with whiteness and situate those that are non-white outside of the realms of purity and perfection (Rendon, 1993). The previously mentioned website does acknowledge alternative ways of viewing whiteness:

While there are very few negative connotations to white, particularly in western culture, too much white can be cold, isolating and empty. It implies a feeling of sterility, detachment and disinterest, providing little stimulation for the senses. In other cultures it is traditionally related to death and mourning. In these cultures death usually means the end of one life and the beginning of another, moving forward to a new life, so the color psychology meaning of new beginnings still holds. (Scott-Kemmis, 2009, n.p.)

Although this statement offers somewhat of a balanced view of the color white, in the end it still situates “white” as redemptive. Undoubtedly as both a color and a community “white” is important. But it is not superior. This way of thinking not only damages members of non-white groups, but can also negatively impact the healthy social development of members of white communities. Besides breeding a culture of imagined superiority, conceiving white as spotless erases the real imprint of life experience. This way of thinking actually posits white as colorless. White can be seen as empty, bare, and plain. It then makes sense that white students often take some time to identify themselves through a racial or cultural lens (Tatum, 1997). Whiteness implies a void and the experience

of whiteness in relation to culture in America has not done much to challenge this idea. By culture, I am referring to the symbolic vehicles of meaning and experience such as beliefs, values, ritual practices, artistic expression, patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, understanding of history, and a sense of ethnic ethos (or ethnic agency) (Swidler, 1986; Karenga, 1998; Gaunipa-Ho & Guanipa, 1998). From the pressures that many European immigrants felt to discard their ethnic identities in order to become “American” to the lack of personal connection and passion about culture, heritage, and history that many of their contemporary descendants may now experience, whiteness has been more aligned with what you hope to become than what you have been—what you hope to forget rather than what you work to remember.

White has been conceived as a blank slate. But anyone that lives in a snow state knows very well that snow is only white in our imagination. When snow covers our streets it is actually colored gray as a result of its social interactions—the people that walk on it, the cars that drive through it. Life leaves its imprint on the snow. And life also leaves its imprint on people—it gives us color. So what might happen when we provide intentional and deep educational opportunities for white college students to wrestle with issues of cultural identity—to explore the life experiences that give their lives color? This was one of the questions that motivated the development of a course that was rooted in the concept of critical pedagogy and that engaged white students in wrestling with issues of culture, community, and social change. This article shares the details of this project by first reviewing the scholarship on culture, multicultural education, and actionable space. I then provide a brief overview of some of the key theoretical frameworks that ground the course as well as the methods employed. Finally, I share the full first-person narratives from three white college student participants—two students of Italian descent and one student of Armenian descent. These “Cultural Self Portraits” were a class assignment and the three shared here offer a representative voice for the other 30 white students that participated in this course. All thirty portraits have been analyzed to reveal common and emerging themes. Based on these themes of family, heritage, resilience, and fellowship, I have chosen these three as representative stories. The article will close with conclusions and implications.

## CRITICAL CULTURAL PEDAGOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is difficult to define culture. Debates on the structures and components of culture have occurred throughout several disciplines including sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, and education. In the last twenty years, definitions of culture have generally evolved to view it as symbolic vehicles of meaning and experience such as beliefs, ritual practices, artistic expression, traditions, and cer-

emonies (Swidler, 1986). These critical experiences and interpretations of meaning influence the actions, world-views, approach to life, and values of cultural group members. According to Swidler (1986), culture's influence on actions can be seen not as specific and definitive prescriptions of how people should act, but rather as a tool kit of skills, habits, and approaches by which people build strategies of action and move through everyday life. Measures of cultural competence are not solely about understanding others, but also about being able to define one's culture, articulate its utility, and view cultural experiences as important and impactful.

We may need to revise the way that we construct and define the campus community through a deeper and more concentrated effort to truly integrate culture and community into the college experience. Both Jehangir (2010) and Rodriguez (2001) suggest that new educational strategies, such as the movement towards critical pedagogy (exploring race, class, gender and power), re-constructionist multicultural education (transforming the whole of the educational process), and learning communities (collaborative and cooperative learning tied to a shared living experience) offer important inroads towards change. Beyond educational programs that solely help students to navigate the new terrains of the college environment, truly significant learning refers to the ways in which education provides opportunities for students to come to know themselves more deeply, develop important attachments to the process of learning, connect what they learn to their lives, establish a sense of caring and commitment about a particular topic, and take action on what they have learned in some meaningful way (Fink, 2003). Informed by the scholarship within feminist, ethnic, and critical race studies, cultural practice within higher education must affirm that valuable knowledge has been produced not only within organizations and institutions, but also on street corners, in barbershops, churches, porches, and in homes (Barnes, 1990; Mohanty, 2003; Reinharz, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Culture has lived in towns and villages long before it lived in books, retreats, and classrooms.

### *Social Messaging & Cultural Efficacy*

Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999), note that ethnic group messages have a major impact on one's ethnic identification. Positive ethnic group messages encourage greater identification with that ethnic group, while negative messages encourage an individual to feel shame or a lack of attachment to their own ethnic identity (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 41). Helms (1992) offers an example:

An environmental explanation is that White as a skin color symbolizes power and oppression in this country. White is the skin color of the people who have historically conquered, enslaved, and oppressed people of color. It would not be surprising if many White people become un-

comfortable when they think of themselves as “looking like” a member of the aggressive group. (p. 8)

Tatum (1997) explains that because whiteness represents the societal norm, many white people can go through life without being made to think much about their race. Race is often a nonfactor, which allows them the privilege of concentrating on other aspects of self. Though this may seem like an ideal goal—to transcend race and to be able to see oneself beyond the physical—it actually works to hurt white people because it does not allow them to be situated within a very real social problem. And so, when it comes to issues like racism only the oppressed are present because the privileged refuse to join the conversation and often fail to see what insight they have to contribute. Again, Helms (1992) provides insight:

Although the White person may choose a variety of ways of dealing with being White, it is clear that the messages one receives about it are ambiguous. One should marry White, live in White neighborhoods and so forth, but one is not supposed to consciously acknowledge that one is White unless one is a bigot. So, in this society, one learns to act White, but not be White. White people teach each other to lie about being White. (p. 9)

A deeply rooted cultural orientation may be an important means of countering the dominant cultural norms, negative opinions, and cultural values that oppress many people. It is through continuously engaging active cultural learning that one establishes a healthy cultural identity throughout life. By healthy cultural identity, I don't mean the over inflated contributions of white culture that have historically and continue to form the American cultural narrative. By healthy, I mean a full, critical, rich, and daring attempt to face one's cultural experience directly in order to search for the struggles, triumphs, heritage, and meaning inherent in culture.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE COURSE

If the messages that one receives, positive or negative, have a major impact on ethnic identity, then exposure to a learning experience that affirms and teaches culture in an authentic and honest way can have tremendous effects on student cultural development and societal involvement. Though the standard practice is to use traditional racial and ethnic identity theories to guide research and practice on culture and ethnicity, I chose to focus on cultural efficacy development in this course. I consider cultural efficacy to be a demonstrated level of cultural capacity or agency [positive feelings about one's culture; a strong and critical understanding of the histories, components, values, and structures of one's culture; honesty about the shortcomings of one's culture, and confidence in one's culture to contribute and add value to the world] (Jenkins, 2013) Cultural efficacy, as an ongoing life-long process, can be examined through the framework of actionable space. The theoretical construct of actionable space was originally used to

understand issues of personal agency with regards to women victims of violence. However, the construct also provides a relevant lens through which to view the process of cultural learning and development. Actionable space frames development within four types of personal “spaces”: Embodied, reflective, dialogue, and actionable space (Sharma-Brymer, 2005). Embodied and reflective space involve the individual and her personal locale with regards to an issue. Embodied space refers to the past experiences that influence one’s present orientation or understanding. Reflective space refers to the deep contemplation of these past experiences and present beliefs. These two forms of space include inward reflection on the ways in which one’s identity, values, history, and culture influence her present orientation and thought processes. Dialogue space is the space, environment, or experience in which one safely gives voice to these reflections and to the critical evaluation of the world. Finally, actionable space represents the interactions of all previously mentioned dimensions that result in an asserted stance or action towards justice, personal agency or in this case cultural efficacy (Sharma-Brymer, 2005). This space refers to the ideological sense of personal or cultural agency—being comfortable enough to reflect on, dialogue about, or engage in your culture. Viewed through this theoretical framework, multicultural education should establish healthy, affirming, and safe arenas in which one can effectively explore issues of culture. Essentially, the idea of creating “safe space” is truly about creating environments in which risk taking, deep exploration, controversy, and complexity can be engaged, embraced, and appreciated rather than feared and avoided. Safe does not necessarily mean comfortable but it does imply a valuable opportunity for healthy growth—pushing, pulling, nurturing, challenging, and affirming.

### *The Course*

Eight years ago, I developed a cultural leadership course as a partnership between the department of African & African American Studies and the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Penn State University. The initial goal of the course was to offer a learning experience that focused on the leadership praxis of communities of color and to explore the ways that contemporary college students understood, defined, and valued culture. However, as each semester passed and increasingly more white students became interested in the course the ways that the course not only exposed white students to cross cultural learning but also engaged them in deep exploration of their cultural selves became apparent.

**Course procedures.** The first several weeks of the course involve students in various learning activities in which they reflect on their personal cultural experience. Students put together “cajitas” or sacred boxes of special items, artifacts, music, and keepsakes that are symbolic of their culture or personally important to them. Because some college students are no longer living at home with all of their many possessions, this exercise helps students to appreciate the few special

things that they did choose to bring with them and to reflect on the meanings that are attached to these objects. Next, we view, the documentary “Faces of America” (2010), a project by Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in which he works with celebrities to trace their roots and to learn their family histories. Viewing the excitement and amazement of learning family history expressed by well-known figures serves as a source of inspiration for students as they embark on their own journey. Group discussions then provided an opportunity to explore how students define culture and what structures they feel make up their culture. The discussion questions are semi-structured to allow all course members to contribute and to feed off of one another’s responses. Our discussions are followed by an assignment for students to write a cultural self-portrait. The cultural self-portrait is a written narrative of any length that shares students’ cultural life stories—explanations of what culture means to them, stories of their family history, and the details of any influences and experiences that they feel impact their culture. The result then is a more in-depth and individual portrait of the cultural self. Because it was an assignment, all students were required to write the paper, but they were given a choice regarding the use of their paper and discussion comments to inform journal articles. All students signed consent forms for me to use their papers as data. No length was given as it was important to allow students to write intimately and freely about their lives. Students were encouraged to include any other information that they felt relevant including photographs and artifacts. These reflections, when critically analyzed and cross compared for emerging themes, were expected to reveal student ideologies and definitions of culture in a contemporary America.

The concept of having students write “Cultural Self-Portraits” is motivated by a research methodology called portraiture. Portraiture is a qualitative method rooted in phenomenology. To understand portraiture, you must first understand phenomenology. Marshall and Rossman (1999) define phenomenology as the study of lived experience and how people understand this experience. It assumes that there is an “essence” to shared experiences that can be articulated through narration (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Portraiture combines science and art to paint a holistic picture of an experience or phenomenon. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), the creator of this method of inquiry, offers the following description:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience...Portraits seek to record the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom, (p. xv)

A critical component of portraiture is its focus on goodness. A propensity towards goodness does not mean that portraits must only focus on positive aspects of a topic nor does it mean that information must be presented in a positive light.

Rather, “goodness” refers to the refusal to be driven by past research tendencies to focus on failure and deficiency. Most of the broad social narratives about the “white race” have followed this path of negative imaging. However, in its natural habitat—in communities and homes—culture does not seem to be created in reaction to negativity but is rather a tool to sustain positive life practice. So, then portraiture shifts this focus to discovering the inherent good in the people, institutions, or concepts studied. And most importantly, it focuses on how the people that experience the phenomenon define or interpret goodness.

Of particular significance for portraiture is the use of *narrative* to gain a deeper sense of the lived experience. We learn to love stories at a very early age. Stories teach moral lessons, share knowledge, and pass on values. They provide us with a context to better understand complex issues or broad concepts. Stories help us to make sense of the meanings of life experiences. Featherstone (1989) has noted the value of the use of storytelling to inform research. He explains both the richness and complexity of the information gained through story as well as the significant responsibility of the researcher:

The telling of stories can be a profound form of scholarship moving serious study close to the frontiers of art in the capacity to express complex truth and moral context in intelligible ways... The methodologies are inseparable from the vision. Historians have used narrative as a way in which to make sense of lives and institutions over time, but over years they have grown abashed by its lack of scientific rigor. Now, as we look for ways to explore context and describe the thick textures of lives over time in institutions with a history, we want to reckon with the author’s own stance and commitment to the people being written about. Storytelling takes on a fresh importance. (p. 377)

In this course, it is the student story that is being collected, the student story that is being analyzed, and ultimately the student story that gives form and definition to the concept of culture. Their stories provide an authentic voice articulating the structures, layers, and practices that comprise what they perceive to be culture.

**Setting & context.** This course has been piloted at two universities. The first school, Penn State University is housed in a largely rural setting. The total university system has a student enrollment of a little over 80,000 students. This particular campus houses over 40,000 students. Students of color comprise a little over 10 percent of the student population on this campus, accounting for 5300 students. The university is housed in a city with a similar majority white demographic structure. The town is 98% white. This offers a different contrast to the next campus, George Mason University, where students of color make up about 30% of the student body. The second school is located in the suburbs of a metropolitan city. It has a total enrollment of 32,562 with about 20,000 undergraduates. The school has about 4000 Asian students, 2500 African American students,



2500 Latino students, 130 indigenous students, and 15,000 white students. This makes their overall racial composition to be about 10,000 students of color and 15,000 white students—a generally close number. The course has been run for five years at Penn State and two years at George Mason.

**Participants.** Each year, the class is comprised of a roster of 25 students. In the eight years since its creation, there have now been over 100 young adults that have participated. There have been 118 cultural self-portraits examined. Students ranged in classification from first year students through college seniors. As a complete study, there have been 30 white students; 20 Asian American students; 42 African American/West Indian/African students; and 26 Latino students. This article shares the insights from the 30 white students. A book on the experiences of students of color is forthcoming. Below, I share three full-length “Cultural Self Portraits.” These select portraits are strong representatives of the themes found in the other 27 portraits that were authored by white college students including issues of family, heritage, pride, food, music, and the joy of establishing new, contemporary traditions. Each portrait is written in the student’s own words. Baxter Magolda’s (1992) principles on student involvement in research and program assessment support the intimate involvement of student voice in this study. These principles call for educators to validate students as knowers and to situate learning in the students lived experience. Both of these involve the researcher or educator in relinquishing formal notions of power and inviting the students to inform practice through sharing their life experiences and meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

### *Nick’s Cultural Self Portrait*

Never Again

Politicians speak the words they do not mean

They say never again but the effort is never seen

1915, 1 million dead,

They said never again,

1945, 10 million dead,

They said never again,

1978, 1 million dead,

They said Never Again

1994 1 million dead,

They said Never Again

2006 half a million dead,

They said Never Again,

How long will the world watch genocide,  
 When trouble occurs do we just hide,  
 How many people must die,  
 Until the world starts to try,  
 Never Again

I wrote the poem above when I was 14. I am a white male born in Boston, in a predominantly Irish Catholic neighborhood. I never thought a person like me could be harmed emotionally or physically based on my identity—until I heard my grandfather’s story. When he was also 14, my grandfather, Aram Terzian, watched his father and mother be taken by the Turkish government to be killed. The more I learned about this story, I realized how amazing my family was. The story goes something like this: As tensions between the Armenians and the Turkish grew higher, danger was rising for the Armenian people. The Turkish did not like the Armenians because of their inclusive culture and Orthodox Christian beliefs. My great-grandfather Suren Terzian who was an affluent businessman in his village was a targeted person by the Turkish government. One day the Turkish soldiers came to my grandfather’s house and took my great-grandfather and two of my great uncles. My great-grandmother, Paris Terzian, knew that the Turkish government would come soon to take the rest of the family. So she hid the children at a Turkish friend’s houses. Soon after, Turkish soldiers took Paris, who was pregnant and eventually sent her on a death march. She was luckily able to pay the soldiers and escape. She was able to pay nomads called the Kurds to protect her as they collected all five of her children. They then escaped the country. The specifics of the story are so important to me because it shows everything Paris Terzian went through to keep her children safe. To just know I share the same blood as this woman makes me incredibly proud to call myself a Terzian and no one can take that away from me.

My philosophy is that you need to know where you came from before you go anywhere. This statement does not just mean simply know about your past, but that a person needs to carry their heritage with them where ever they go in life. It is very easy for someone to be so involved with their present life instead of recognizing how their heritage is always with them. By having a personal connection to this horrifying past, I know that I want to do everything in my power to prevent these types of things from happening again. As I became older, genocide became a topic that I wanted to study heavily in every way possible. In high school I realized that other genocides including the Armenian genocide were not in the curriculum. I learned that other genocides happened after the Holocaust, which the majority of the population did not know about. One of the most chilling quotes that I have heard came from Adolf Hitler a week before his invasion of Poland, “No one will remember...who still nowadays speaks of the Armenian Genocide.”

This statement is so true even to this day. Every time the world turns its back to mass killings it makes me ill. Having this background and knowing who my grandfather was gives me a life purpose that I want to do everything in my power to prevent future genocides from happening. I don't want my children to be part of an education system that teaches students about flappers in the 1920's but not the Armenian, Cambodian and Bosnian Genocide. I am currently studying Non-Profit Administration and minoring in Conflict Resolution. My dream is to be able to join non-profit organizations such as the Genocide Intervention Center and The Genocide Education project. I believe that with education and prevention that we can finally make Genocide a thing of the past.

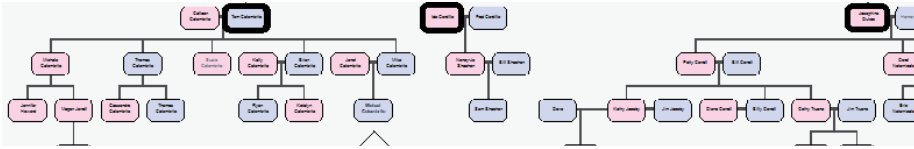
My cultural heritage will never leave my mind for a day because I know that I would not be sitting here writing this paper in college if it wasn't for my courageous family. When it would have been so easy to give up and to not even try to survive, they said "no" and fought for their lives. Anytime I believe something is a struggle, I remember that I am a Terzian and we do not just lay down.

### *Michael's Cultural Self-Portrait*

I find my family to be very unique. There is a huge amount of diversity that traces back my family heritage. Every time I get together with my dad's side of the family, I always end up talking to them about his background. Throughout the years, I have come across so much information regarding the history of my grandparents, and even my great grandparents. Here is what I have obtained over the years.

In approximately 1860, Fillipo Colombrito was born in Agira, Sicily, married Agatha and then raised 3 boys and 1 girl; Antonio, Gaetano (Tom), Fillapina (Phil) and Sam. Sam Colombrito married Rosalie Masimino, seen in the picture on the right on their wedding day in Sicily in the early 1900's (before their trip to America).

One Christmas, there were about 30 of us sitting in a living room listening to a cassette tape interview between my dad's cousin and my great grandmother. She was talking about the days where she was on the boat from Sicily and coming in through Ellis Island in the early 1900's. I was very young when I heard that tape, but I am going to bring it up when we are planning our next holiday get together. I've always had a deep interest in my cultural background. I recently took the Strengths Quest strength finder, and one of my top 5 strengths was Context, which showed a deep appreciation on the past.



**Figure 1**

Even though the names are not visible, this is part of a family tree that we have generated over the years. The left section, which takes about one-third of the tree, is the direct family that I mentioned above. The arrow is pointing to where I am located in the family. The three darker-outlined bubbles are all siblings, who are descendants of Sam and Rosalie Colombrito, also mentioned previously. Basically, everyone on this tree is who gets together for all of our holidays and family gatherings. Seeing this connection on paper means a lot to me.

One of the fun aspects of this part of my family that has shaped me into who I am today is our love of music. My grandfather has played accordion since his high school days. He has been in various bands, including one that opened up for the famous Franki Valli and the Four Seasons when they were just starting their career. My grandfather and uncle influenced me into playing music. Every summer, my direct family gets together for a vacation in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Among all of the fun things we do as cousins, with the entire family, or just individually, there is always one constant: my grandfather will break out the accordion. Within the past few years, my uncle and I have joined in with guitars. It has turned into a yearly ritual that we just cannot do without.

As you have read, music would be one of the main factors of my culture that has shaped me into what I am today. However, there is another aspect that has also shaped me: food. There has been a huge appreciation for food all across the board in my family. My father worked as a chef and kitchen manager in various restaurants. My mother was a bartender for 24 years of her life. They even met in a restaurant as co-workers. In high school, I worked at that same restaurant. Along with our previous careers, when we get together with family and friends, we are usually the ones who put together the best meal.

I want to look even more into the future, though. As I am typing this, I am thinking more and more about how I have ancestors from Sicily. Are the future generations going to keep looking back at us as natives of Sicily, or are they going to look at us as natives of Virginia Beach? I can't even begin to think about where my great-great-grandchildren will be living, and how my culture will impact their culture. Regardless, I hope that they get to experience the same type of cultural development that I have.

### *Allison's Cultural Self Portrait*

A few years ago, I ventured to Italy with my family to explore my father's culture and his upbringing. This is when I first became fascinated and interested in finding more information about where my family came from. I come from a mix of European descendants. My mother is half Irish and half Scottish. My father is full Italian and comes from a very Italian family. I have always seen myself as mostly Italian, with a little bit of Irish. Growing up my father was very into his heritage, and from an early age he would tell me stories of his experiences and where his parents came from. Every night, my dad would tuck me into bed and I would ask him to tell me a story. These are the moments that I cherish most with my dad because through these stories I was able to learn so much about his culture growing up in inner city South Philadelphia in an all-Italian neighborhood. His lifestyle was so different from the one that I was experiencing, so I was intrigued and excited. Through his memories, I was able to learn from my dad, which ultimately influenced me.

My great-great-grandfather Vincenzo Esposito, came to Italy when he was 26 with his younger brother in 1867. Then in 1907 my great-great-grandfather Nicola Esposito followed in his adventurous footsteps and immigrated to the US. It is in Philadelphia that they came to start a new life and family. Later, my dad's mother emigrated from Italy after World War II. She then met my Italian grandfather who was a beer distributor in the heart of Philadelphia. My dad came from a hardworking family. My dad was the first in his family to be accepted to an Ivy League school and obtain his medical degree. The one aspect that I cherish so much and honor more than anything in this world is how my dad and his family worked so hard to be where they are today. He has taught me everything I know about what it means to treasure what you have. He always told me that no matter the outcome, as long as you work your hardest then nothing else matters. This has been with me always and forever with anything I do. Learning his background and my grandparent's background has had a large influence on my life. These different stories that my dad would tell me every night, year after year, have helped to shape the person I am today. His way of life and family's history are so influential on my attitude of family and life.

Through my dad I have come to learn the meaning of my last name and have been able to not only visit my relatives in Italy, but I am also able to trace back my relatives and grandparents to 1838. Esposito was the name given to orphans who were left on the church stoops in Italy before they found a home. Learning this bit about my family's last name also made me realize how lucky and fortunate I am. I have always believed that learning this factual piece of history about the meaning of my last name gave me a sense of culture that I could share with all other Esposito's around the world. The family's Italian crest hangs in my basement over the wall with its brightly colored sun and a piercing arrow running

through the center. It makes me proud that I am able to be an American, yet still have a family and culture that is different from other friends and family that I know. We are all different and have different backgrounds. Being able to learn so much about my dad's side of the family and where they came from gives me a feeling of accomplishment and dignity because I have a name that I have to live up to and proudly support.

The one thing that I absolutely adore about family culture is learning the history of where your previous family members came from. I have found that culture to me is not so much how I dress or what clothing I wear, but the stories that my parents and grandparents have shared with me about their personal lives growing up and how they have become the people they are today. I don't need artifacts or material items to tell me who I am. I am proud to say that I have grown up with an intriguing and happy soul searching of my family's history.

Here I am today writing this paper and getting ready to go to Philadelphia this weekend to visit my grandparents. Since I have been at school and busy with work, I have not seen my dad's parents for a very long time. After receiving this assignment, I told my dad that I thought it would be a good idea to go to his parents and ask them more about my family's history before it is too late. With that my dad booked a train ticket for this weekend where he and I will be going up and staying with my grandparents over the weekend. I am so excited because this assignment has given me the push to go back and dig further into the heritage of the Esposito family. I also emailed my grandmother from my mother's side last night asking her more questions about her family. She was thrilled that I was once again asking her about it and responded with an upbeat and informative email. I have found that family is the main aspect of culture. Without it you would not have a sense of identity or self worth. Learning from people around you, especially your own blood is one of the most important and influential pieces of life. It brings happiness that you can carry on forever to make and create your own story of life.

## CONCLUSION

The primary reason that I engage students in authoring cultural self-portraits is so that we may move away from traditional views of culture that often leave some communities feeling that they don't have one. Everyone has culture. The cultural narratives of these students were analyzed to identify themes—both intersecting and diverging. What types of issues do all students seem to discuss when they are asked to talk about culture? What different insights do students that feel they have no culture bring to the table? And is that voice really divergent or are they still *defining* culture in much the same way as others but just acknowledging that it isn't present in their lives? These stories come together to shape the broad picture of how these students perceive culture and why it is important to them.

According to these students, “culture” is the traditions, values, support, and safe foundation provided by and through family. The family unit is the most critical part of building a sense of culture, legacy, and heritage. Whether it is parents instilling values and morals, grandparents leading lives of example, or the extended family doing something as simple as gathering, culture often centers on family. This seems to be universal for all people. Students of color were also included in the course and family was always what they mentioned first. This becomes an important insight for educators—it is a call to become much more intentional about how we involve “family” in the college experience. Beyond parent and family weekend or soliciting donations, how do we invite families into the college experience in truly meaningful ways? Is it possible to make students’ family experience a topic of formal learning? What academic spaces do we create for students to spend time thinking about their family history?

The intended audience of campus programs must be expanded to provide a more open campus—one that occasionally invites the family and community to join the conversation. Also, the topics of cultural programs should focus more on the real family issues experienced by students. To the students in this study, culture was a practical kit of tools that they could use to help them navigate real life issues. Therefore, cultural program topics must be transformed to strategically address pressing cultural issues in students’ lives such as understanding the cause of family struggle; coming to terms with parental failure; exploring the expectations of contemporary pop culture; examining the function of religion in the everyday lives of students; celebrating mothers, grandparents, and families; and offering opportunities to share stories of survival (through story sharing, dialogue circles, or the arts) (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Delgado, 1990; Smiley, 2006). Indigenous cultural practices should not be discarded—heritage is important. Instead, the parameters of the ways in which educational institutions approach pedagogy, teaching, and learning can be expanded to include community-based forms of cultural practice. For example, during my cultural leadership undergraduate course, I facilitate a course session on the importance of the spoken word. As part of the discussion, I review the history of storytelling across various cultures. We often remember the importance of storytelling to African and Native American communities (Banks-Wallace, 2002). We talk less about the history of European camp-tellers and the ways that setting up camp and sharing stories and songs served as an important cultural practice for the early European settlers in the United States.

The culture of today’s young adult has been shaped by past experiences as well as the contemporary circumstances that often change the way traditions and rituals are utilized in daily life. Among contemporary white college students, culture is a constantly evolving phenomenon. Although culture isn’t limited by history, our historical experiences are still important. History is a collection of experiences that shape both our world and our selves. Viewing history as a collection

of meaningful life experiences rather than distant events makes it difficult to say that people aren't shaped by history. Our experiences always shape us. Culture is not about one having an ancestor that fled the famine, it is about who that ancestor became as a result of that experience. Nick's self-portrait illustrates this. Our experiences mold us—they begin to influence how we approach our activities, jobs, education, etc. And so a distant ancestor may have developed values and perspectives that influenced how they raised their children and then their children combined these lessons with their own life experiences and raised their children—everyone passing down these perspectives along the way. Such was the case in Michael's family.

History is a silent form of inheritance. It is not the famine or the genocide itself, but rather the perspectives and strategies of survival that came out of those experiences that are probably living resurrected through young people today. They may not even know it. Many young people may not pay too much attention to cultural heritage on a daily basis. But after spending the last eight years inside of the cultural lives of college students, I am sure that culture is alive and well. And I am certain that it is still working its special kind of magic--transforming pain into purpose and allowing a more clear vision of our selves to appear amidst the fog of racial indifference.

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