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Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Awakening: A South Asian Becoming “Critically” Aware of Race in America

Vinay Harpalani*

AMBIGUITY

“Japanese Beetle!” “Japanese Beetle!” It is the fall of 1979, and my earliest memories of kindergarten class are not so pleasant. Several young children are darting around me in circles, repeatedly yelling, “Japanese Beetle!” At a mere five years of age, I understood all too acutely that I was the object of relentless teasing, but I did not think about how inaccurate this teasing was. While I was aware of my ethnicity—Asian Indian, or South Asian American¹ as I now prefer, it somehow did not register that my classmates had identified me incorrectly.

Looking back, I suspect that the teasing was related to the rising economic competition between the U.S. and Japan in the late 1970s, particularly in the automotive industry. I wonder now if any of those kids had parents who worked at the Chrysler plant down the street from my elementary school; that might explain where they learned the racial epithet.

Fast-forward to the winter of 1991, my junior year of high school. The scene is the locker room, after basketball practice. The U.S. is heavily immersed in the first Persian Gulf War, and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein is one

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1. The term “South Asia” refers to the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives Islands. Afghanistan is also often included in South Asia, although at other times it is designated within “Central Asia.” “South Asian Americans,” as such, are Americans who trace their ancestry back to these regions and chose to identify as a progressive collective, emphasizing their own common experiences in the U.S. rather than the political conflicts between and within their countries of origin. See generally http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia.

of the most hated men in America. So this time the insult is “Saddam!” and the perpetrators are my teammates on the Glasgow High School boys’ basketball team. One of them warns the others to stop heckling me. “His dad actually might be Saddam!” he cracks. These kids knew I was not from Iraq, but I don’t think they much cared. I resembled the enemy more than anyone else they knew, which made me a convenient target.

As illustrated by these two memorable incidents, I received more than my fair share of ethnically-related ribbing. Interestingly, however, little of it actually involved my own ethnic group.

There were the ululations and references to rain dances—stereotypically associated with Native American groups—that I sometimes heard in the park or at school. These came from kids who seemed to confuse American and Asian Indians. Epithets denoting Chinese and biracial identities were also occasionally thrown my way. At least the little blonde-haired twins across the street got it right when they yelled “Gandhi, Gandhi!” to me or to my parents.

But growing up, I never thought about how I became this malleable target of ethnic derision. I doubt that I even viewed this ridiculing in racial or ethnic terms; it seemed just like any other childhood teasing.

While I have passed the age where blatant peer disrespect is a common and socially acceptable occurrence, my ever-changing ethnic characterization is still apparent. In the company of White Americans, people often think I am “Italian,” but in predominantly Black crowds, it is usually “Puerto Rican.” When I visited the Southwest, residents of that area frequently mistook me for “Mexican.” My tenth grade English teacher sometimes confused me with the one Laotian student in our class, and at one time or another, I have been mistaken for any number of ethnicities—Greek, Spanish, Arab, and others.

Although I did not directly connect it to my own experiences, this uncertainty about my racial and ethnic identity did spark my curiosity as a child. I wondered exactly what race South Asians belonged to. Were they Caucasian or not? At the time, I had not realized that these racial categories are not strict groupings; rather, they are changing entities that represent political interests, and they have often been molded specifically to oppress people of color.

As I would later learn, the U.S. government also could not find a racial category to neatly fit South Asians. So the government often placed South Asians wherever it could best deny our civil rights. In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Asian Indians were not “White” and therefore not entitled to seek citizenship.² Ironically, despite this ruling, the 1970 Census categorized Asian Indians as “White” in an attempt to deny us benefits of recently enacted

2. *United States v. Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

civil rights legislation.³ It was only after South Asian communities in the U.S. protested this classification that we were classified as “Asian or Pacific Islander/Asian Indian.”

Moreover, after September 11, 2001, South Asians and Arabs have been the joint target of backlash discrimination and state-sanctioned racial profiling in spite of the fact that the government places them in different racial groups.⁴ South Asian racial categorization thus remains a point of contention and confusion.

That is why Nazli Kibria’s characterization of South Asians in America as “ambiguous non-Whites” struck a chord in me when I read it.⁵ I began to realize how South Asian American racial classification illustrates the social construction of race,⁶ and how the racial ambiguity of South Asians in America is not just an abstract, academic concept; it is an aspect of our identity that I have lived and experienced directly.

Just as our shifting racial classifications have been one of many attempts by the U.S. government to subjugate people of color, my own changing racial identity has often rendered me a scapegoat for my fellow Americans. But even when I am not directly targeted, my racially ambiguous identity proves to be a salient force. The highly charged racial landscape of America is a world not only of oppression, but also of ambivalence—especially for people of color.

AMBIVALENCE

I spent my entire childhood and undergraduate years living in New Castle County, Delaware, a place marked by a peculiar and ambivalent history with regard to issues of race. Delaware treads the line between North and South; during the Civil War, it was a slave state but remained loyal to the Union. It has always been torn between northern liberalism and southern segregationist policies, creating a subtle but distinctive racial tension that filtered its way into my life.

3. See Susan Koshy, *Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity*, 7 *DIASPORA* 285 (1998). Prior to 1970, the Census Bureau had classified Asian Indians with a variety of designations, including “Non-white” and “Hindu.” *Id.*

4. South Asians are classified by the Office of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, as “Asian/Pacific Islander,” while Arabs are classified as “White.” See Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, 62 Fed. Reg. 58781 (October 30, 1997), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/OMB/fedreg/ombdir15.html> (Last visited April 18, 2009).

5. See Nazli Kibria, *Not Asian, Black or White? Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity*, 22 *AMERASIA JOURNAL* 77 (1996).

6. See generally Vinay Harpalani, *Formal, Material, and Symbolic Modes of Racialization: Examining South Asian Americans’ Access to Whiteness* (2007) (unpublished manuscript on file with author). This paper was presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the Law and Society Association and Research Committee on Sociology of Law, Berlin, Germany, July 2007, and at the Latino Critical Legal Theory, Inc. (LatCrit) XIII Symposium, Seattle, WA, October 2008.

This tension began with the decisions in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, where the U.S. Supreme Court held that racial segregation in public schooling was unconstitutional and that it should be eliminated “with all deliberate speed.”⁷ In spite of this ruling, public schools around the country today largely remain as segregated de facto as they were in 1954.⁸ Only a few areas—those that demonstrated a particularly virulent racism—were ordered to implement busing and other meaningful remedies to actively integrate schools.⁹ New Castle County, Delaware was one of these places.¹⁰

So in 1978, one year before I started kindergarten, New Castle County implemented, by federal court order, one of the most comprehensive school desegregation plans in the entire country.¹¹ Children from the predominantly Black neighborhoods of Wilmington were bused out to suburban schools for nine out of twelve grades after kindergarten, while kids from the mainly White suburbs of Newark, where I lived, were sent to Wilmington schools for three years.¹² This provided a unique opportunity for students from different backgrounds—Black and White, urban and suburban, rich, middle class, and poor—to go to school together.

But as I went through thirteen years of public schooling in Delaware, I did not realize that all of the school districts in our county were under federal court surveillance due to its history of racial bias. It did not occur to me that racial integration or busing was anything but the norm in American society. And I certainly did not realize the impact that being a racially ambiguous figure in this racially charged context would have on my life.

Nevertheless, I did feel the impact of desegregation in many tangible ways. It shaped my experiences by determining the people I attended school with and encountered on a daily basis. When I was growing up, Delaware had few South Asian residents. Our school population, mandated by court order, was about 70 percent White and 30 percent Black. Representation of other ethnic groups was minimal. Essentially, I was a lone, ambiguous figure, caught

7. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). In this ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that racial segregation in public schooling was unconstitutional, but it did not yet pose a plan to eliminate it. The phrase, “with all deliberate speed,” comes from the Supreme Court’s second ruling in *Brown: Brown v. Board of Education (II)*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955). Here, the Court’s vague language allowed Southern states to resist desegregation for many years. Future Supreme Court rulings, such as *Milliken v. Bradley*, 418 U.S. 717 (1974), also significantly limited school desegregation efforts.

8. ERIKA FRANKENBERG & GARY ORFIELD, *LESSONS IN INTEGRATION: REALIZING THE PROMISE OF RACIAL DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS* (2007).

9. GARY ORFIELD, SUSAN E. EATON, & ELAINE R. JONES, *DISMANTLING DESEGREGATION: THE QUIET REVERSAL OF BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* (1997).

10. See JEFFREY A. RAFFEL, *THE POLITICS OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: THE METROPOLITAN REMEDY IN DELAWARE* (1980).

11. *Id.*

12. The disparity inherent in this plan—the fact that children from Wilmington endured the long bus rides for many more years than did suburban youth—escaped me at the time.

in the milieu of this social experiment: racial integration.

In retrospect, I notice how the experiment was circumvented informally. As we progressed through elementary and middle school, our classes gradually became more segregated by academic tracking, and our peer groups soon followed. And because I was this lone, racially ambiguous figure, I straddled the line of marginality between these Black and White peer groups.

One of my best friends, Jerv, was a Black kid from Wilmington. I met Jerv in the second grade, and we attended the same schools until our high school graduation. By the sixth grade, the academic and social separation of our peers, largely by race, was well underway. Although I was a very good student, marked for the highest academic track, my social niche appeared uncertain. I did not fit in naturally with the any of Black or White cliques, and as I searched for a place within these slowly separating peer groups, Jerv invited me to take up one of his favorite pastimes: basketball.

Up to this point, I had never thought of myself as an athlete; indeed, seldom had I seen anyone of South Asian descent involved in sports. But playing ball was just what I needed at the time. It gave me a new identity and an opportunity to have fun, all while gaining a little social status in our teenage world.

Very soon, I became heavily immersed in the game, spending hours every evening at my neighborhood court. I gained a reputation around the neighborhood as a “ballaholic”—one who was obsessed with playing—and basketball was the activity that I would most identify with through high school.

Playing ball also introduced me to a new set of peers, leading me down an unanticipated path of racial socialization. Although my neighborhood was predominantly White, most of the players at these courts were Black. Just as I embarked upon my adolescence, which is perhaps the perplexing time in one’s life, I had somehow situated myself within the highly racialized domain of basketball. And by spending most of my free time over the next six years in this context, I would begin to define my peer groups and shape my view of race in America.¹³

Throughout middle and high school, I transitioned, on a daily basis, between the predominantly White honors classes I attended during the day, and the largely Black crowd of basketball aficionados, who were playing in the

13. In addition to the narrative here, I could tell many personal stories of racial stereotyping on the basketball court. For example, during the summer after 9th grade, I attended a basketball camp in Wilmington, where I was one of a few attendees who was not Black. After being picked dead last for tournament team play, out of 60 kids among the middle/high school group, I surprised everyone with my play. There were many individual players who were better than me, but my team finished second (out of eight) in the tournament, in part because I far exceeded expectations. For my performance, I was awarded the Most Improved Player trophy for the entire camp. Needless to say, these kinds of experiences were also significant in developing my race consciousness.

gym after school or at my neighborhood court in the evening. Each group acted as if I belonged more to the other, and I felt embraced by neither—as much as I tried to fit in with both.

But in spite of my dual marginality and subtle ambivalence, there was an important distinction between my experiences with these respective groups. I saw my White peers only in classes and in academic activities; we did not socialize much. These kids seemed to have a very planned and regimented schedule for recreation, one that I was not a part of. Even within classes, my closest friends were Christol and Melanie, the only Black students in our honors cohort. I did not feel connected to most of my other honors classmates. We interacted as necessary—sometimes amicably and sometimes not so amicably—but we did not hang out. I observed that their predominantly White peer groups tended to be very cliquish. Either you were part of the group or you were not, and I certainly was not.

On the other hand, anyone could go to the court and play a game of basketball; all you had to do was call “winners.” And even though I was not the best ball player and still a marginal figure in the predominantly Black peer groups that frequented these venues, I did not encounter the same level of territoriality.

Not once during high school was I invited to any of my White classmates’ houses: I never set foot in any one of them. I did, however, visit my Black peers’ homes on a number of occasions, talking with their families, playing video games, or just hanging out after playing ball. Once in a while they would even come to my house. I was still at the margins of this group, and in spite of the time we spent together, there seemed to be a deep, social chasm between us. Indeed, I would not even say I felt close to most of them.

But however marginal I felt, I was still a part of the group.

If Beverly Tatum, author of *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*,¹⁴ had come to my high school, I probably would have confused her. I always sat with the Black kids. There were a few White kids who rotated through these Black peer groups, but I was a fixture, and sometimes I was the only one who was not Black. And often, these White kids attended the lower track classes, where most of the Black students were placed. I was the only honors student in my cohort, aside from my friends Christol and Melanie, who associated with predominantly Black peer groups.

Looking back, I also see discrepancies in the way my Black and White peers were treated in school. The White kids in my honors classes had such a jovial rapport with our teachers that when they acted up in class, it was usually regarded as harmless, playful mischief. However, the exact same behavior by

14. BEVERLY D. TATUM, *WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA?* (1997).

lower track, Black students was cause for discipline; apparently, teachers saw them as much more threatening. Some teachers seemed enamored with the star athletes in our high school and were friendly towards Black students who played sports. But this did not usually seem to translate into serious concern for their academic performance or long-term success.

My own relationship with our teachers, most of whom were White, also reflected common racial stereotypes. As a student, our teachers seemed to like me, and some of them taught me very well in classes. But to them, I was the typical Asian American “model minority”—a nice kid who did well in school and stayed out of trouble, but who was rather dull on a personal level.¹⁵ When I brought up the cultural conflicts I faced growing up in an Indian immigrant family,¹⁶ the reaction from students and teachers alike was either laughter or silence. So while I did well academically, I missed out on an important intangible element of school: the mentorship and social bonding that many of my White honors classmates received from our teachers.

Although I usually did not think about these experiences explicitly in racial terms, they did begin to impact my thinking. I often wrote class papers that addressed racism or ethnic identity. When there was a debate about affirmative action in one of my honors classes, I was the only one who spoke in support—even arguing against my teacher. And occasionally, when some of my White honors classmates disparaged Black people in our casual conversations, I protested sharply, often to their amusement. All the while, I was becoming increasingly aware of the disparity of opportunities that lay before my Black and White peers.

But despite my developing racial awareness, I was still quite ambivalent. I desired a certain acceptance from my White peers. As our senior year progressed and we seemingly headed down similar educational and career paths, I longed to fit in and feel connected to my classmates, and to feel like I was really part of our graduating class. But this never happened, and I left high school still feeling quite isolated and marginalized.

The ambivalence I felt parallels the experience of many South Asian Americans, striving for the American dream in the wake of the model minority myth, but encountering rampant barriers and discrimination along the way.¹⁷ And as my awakening has dawned with adulthood, I have started to resolve this ambivalence.

15. For helping me articulate this insight, I thank Raymond Gunn, *Common Goals, Different Paths: A Look at the High School Experiences of High Achieving Asian and African American Students* (2001) (unpublished manuscript on file with author). This paper was presented at the Association for Asian American Studies conference, Toronto, Canada, March 2001. 77

16. See BANDANA PURKAYASATHA, *NEGOTIATING ETHNICITY: SECOND-GENERATION SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS TRAVERSE A TRANSNATIONAL WORLD* (2005).

17. See VIJAY PRASHAD, *THE KARMA OF BROWN FOLK* (2000).

AWAKENING

Part I: Awareness

I went to the University of Delaware as an undergraduate, primed and determined to excel academically. And I did excel, earning almost a 4.0 grade point average while pursuing a pre-medical curriculum. I adopted a new persona, with scholastic endeavors, rather than basketball, as my focus. Reacting to my social alienation in high school, I consciously decided that academic success would be far more important than socializing. But even with this attitude, one aspect of college was inescapably different.

The social experiment had ended; no longer was I straddling the lines in a so-called integrated environment. The University of Delaware was predominantly White—over ninety percent when I attended—and I had few opportunities to interact with Black students. They were scarcely present in my classes or anywhere else on campus. The college peer groups I did find seemed more open and friendly, and for the first time, I felt that I could really be accepted by my new White peers. But no longer did I desire their approval, and deep down, I knew something much more important was missing in my new college world.

The Black kids I had come to know on the basketball courts and in the lunchrooms of Glasgow High School had been left behind, and nobody seemed to care. While there was some attention to issues of “diversity,” the prevalent, implicit attitude was that race did not matter, and that we were all treated equally and fairly.

At the same time, my racial ambiguity now played a new role. With the so-called prosperity of the Clinton years and the politically correct environment of a college campus, there was no reason for anyone to scapegoat me. I had an advantage that my Black peers from high school could not have received—the ability to be racially invisible. I could just fit in with the predominantly White crowd, and tacitly, I was expected by students, professors, and everyone else to assimilate in this manner. But somehow, almost instinctively, I did not want to be a part of that.

Nevertheless, it took me a while to recognize these problems and to try to remedy them. Perhaps this was because I was too immersed in my academics, or maybe I was just uncomfortable with my growing race consciousness. All the while, the “raceless” atmosphere of my classes was, in some ways, even more alienating than my ambiguity and ambivalence growing up. Although I rarely thought about or discussed it, the lack of racial diversity—and specifically the paucity of Black students on campus—prevented me from feeling truly connected to my college environment. Even as my studies progressed well, there was an unconscious, unarticulated void in my life.

Gradually, I began to find activities for students of color, intuitively seeking spaces on campus that were comfortable to me. At the time, Asian Americans were typically not included in such activities at the University of Delaware, but I was proactive in my search. When I became a tutor and mentor for the NUCLEUS¹⁸ program, which serves underrepresented pre-medical students, some of my professors saw this as a nice, charitable activity. Little did they realize that I needed the social and emotional connections the program provided more than NUCLEUS students needed my academic support. While my professors were great academic mentors, the personal fulfillment and guidance I received from NUCLEUS was just as important to my development. I was slowly beginning to fill the void left behind in high school.

But even as my involvement in such activities grew, I still did not comprehend the larger forces that had drawn me to them. Even as I chose not to attend medical school and looked for other career paths, I was not aware of the impact of race in my own life. It was only through my graduate school experiences that I truly became race-conscious. And through this awareness, I have begun to understand and resolve my dissonance.

Part II: Activism

Unlike the ideal graduate prospect, I came to the University of Pennsylvania without a specific area of interest or even a disciplinary focus. I did not know that I would study racial identity and inequity in America and earn a Ph.D. in the process. I was not planning to become a graduate resident fellow (and later a postdoctoral resident fellow) at the W.E.B. Du Bois College House, a dormitory centered upon the theme of African-American history and experiences. And I certainly did not realize that these activities would lead me to explore my South Asian American identity further. But I knew I was searching for something important and meaningful—and somehow, through my life lessons of ambivalence, I sensed that I could find it in this world class university situated in the midst of West Philadelphia.

As I now recognize, the salience of my earlier life experiences, combined with absence of race awareness in my undergraduate world, led me to seek spaces where the struggles of people of color were acknowledged and discussed. When opportunities to learn more about these struggles presented themselves, I could not pass them up. No longer constricted by pre-medical coursework, I enrolled in classes such as “American Racism” and “Psychology of the African American.” My graduate research began to focus on race and racial identity, and I attended almost every campus event on race-related topics. I began reading extensively about race and racism and engaging in discussions and debates with my fellow students across the University. My education

18. NUCLEUS is an acronym that stands for “Network of Undergraduate Collaborative Learning Experiences for Underrepresented Scholars.”

transcended academic disciplines and required curricula in an attempt to make sense and meaning of these phenomena. And it was through these new, eye-opening experiences that I first came across the revolutionary genre of legal scholarship known as Critical Race Theory (CRT).¹⁹

The particular historical moment at the turn of the millennium also energized me to become more politically active and to link my studies with this activism. By the mid-1990s, the right wing assault on affirmative action was fully underway, and soon thereafter, a series of events—the election of George W. Bush, the events of September 11, 2001 and the government reactions to them, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq—all provided an impetus for young progressive people to fight for social change.²⁰ In the midst of this politically charged milieu, I helped to found the CALL TO ACTION project and the Politics and Cultural Pluralism program at Penn, both of which promoted racial equity and justice through scholarship and activism. On April 1, 2003, when the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the University of Michigan affirmative action cases,²¹ I helped to organize the 500 Penn students who marched on Washington in defense of race-conscious admissions policies.²²

Additionally, my work in the Philadelphia public schools exposed me yet again to the vast racial inequality that is American education—but this time with a greater awareness of the historical and political forces that created this injustice. And all of these opportunities brought about my awakening, forcing me to think about my own identity in new ways.

Predominantly White groups often feign an attitude of colorblindness,

19. See DERRICK BELL, *AND WE ARE NOT SAVED: THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE* (1989) and *FACES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM* (1992); KIMBERLE CRENSHAW, NEIL GOTANDA, GARY PELLER, & KENDALL THOMAS (eds.), *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT* (1995); RICHARD DELGADO & JEAN STEFANCIC (eds.), *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE CUTTING EDGE* (2d ed. 2000).

In addition to the classic writings of CRT, I have been heavily influenced by several other lines of scholarship. There is the work of my Ph.D. mentor, Margaret Beale Spencer, *Old Issues and New Theorizing about African American Youth: A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory*, in *BLACK YOUTH: PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR STATUS IN THE UNITED STATES* 37 (Ronald L. Taylor, ed., 1995) (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995); Margaret Beale Spencer and Vinay Harpalani, *What Does "Acting White" Actually Mean?: Racial Identity, Adolescent Development, and Academic Achievement Among African American Youth*, in *MINORITY STATUS, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND SCHOOLING* 22 (John U. Ogbu, ed., 2008). Additionally, sociological theories of racialization have supplemented the insights of critical race theory for me. See MICHAEL OMI & HOWARD WINANT, *RACIAL FORMATION IN THE UNITED STATES* (1994); EDUARDO BONILLA-SILVA, *WHITE SUPREMACY AND RACISM IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA* (2001).

20. Eventually, this energy translated into the fervor that first Howard Dean (unsuccessfully) and then Barack Obama (successfully) capitalized upon in their Presidential campaigns.

21. *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 344 (2003); *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

22. Oral arguments in *Gratz* and *Grutter* occurred before the U.S. Supreme Court on April 1, 2003. Thousands of people rallied in front of the Supreme Court Building while the arguments were heard and marched to the Lincoln Memorial afterwards. See www.bamn.com for details on this demonstration.

acting as if race does not matter, even when these groups are dominated by White leadership, cultural norms, and values.²³ Intuitively, even before my race consciousness developed, I sensed that this colorblindness is an illusion: Whiteness is the invisible standard in these groups, and that racial disparity characterizes every aspect of American life, even when it is not immediately apparent. My life experiences had certainly illustrated the spoken and unspoken ways in which race matters. That is why I felt uncomfortable in predominantly White settings, and because race was ignored or treated superficially, I had difficulty articulating my concerns even in my own mind.

But in an environment like the Du Bois House, where the majority of students are Black, Whiteness ceases to be the tacit norm. In a place defined very explicitly by Black consciousness, I was forced to confront my own racial identity. Even as the residents welcomed and embraced me, I still had to struggle internally with the question of how I fit in. And because there was no façade of colorblindness, I could recognize this challenge and meet it. I watched, learned, and counseled as my residents grappled with the normal trials and tribulations of college life, while as Black students on a majority White campus, they simultaneously explored and negotiated their own racial identities in various ways. I read the elegant writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, particularly struck by his notion of “double consciousness,” that “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...”²⁴ And as I contemplated how the experiences of African Americans related to my own struggles, I began to study South Asian American history and identity, and to place my own life in context.

It was only then that I came across Kibria’s notion of South Asian racial ambiguity and saw how I had lived it. I also learned about the peculiar and poignant racial history of the place where I grew up, realizing its significant role in shaping my experiences and views. Looking at myself through the eyes of Du Bois College House became part of my own “double consciousness”—as a marginal and racially malleable being in a world sharply polarized by race. And my life finally began to make sense, though all of its ambiguity and ambivalence.

Part III. Ambitions

My awakening is still in progress, and articulating my story of race consciousness and awareness is one aspect of it. My awareness and activism led to a new ambition: I want to become a law professor and to teach and write about Critical Race Theory and Education Law. Race and education have been

23. See Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, in *PEACE AND FREEDOM* 10 (July/August 1989).

24. William Edward Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* xxxi (Bantam Books 1989) (1903).

the two main themes in my life narrative, and it only made sense that my work would center upon them. After finishing my Ph.D., I enrolled at New York University School of Law to pursue this ambition. I have had the privilege to work closely with Professors Derrick Bell and Paulette Caldwell—two of the pioneers in the development of Critical Race Theory. During my second year in law school, as Symposium Chair of the South Asian Law Students Association and the Black Allied Law Students Association, I helped to organize a student symposium entitled “Can People of Color Become a United Coalition?,”²⁵ which explored many of the issues of identity and activism that I have analyzed in this essay. Additionally, my larger ambition is to promote Critical Race Theory in the legal academy and beyond. As an Articles Editor on the *NYU Law Review*, I served as a voice for Critical Race Theory, and although my efforts to get the *Law Review* to publish more CRT articles were unsuccessful, they did help to spark several race and gender diversity initiatives on the journal. The experience I gained in the articles selection process will also be invaluable as I aim to make my own contributions as a scholar, activist, and teacher.²⁶

My story of racial ambiguity, ambivalence, and awakening is not unique or isolated: it tracks the growing diversity and increasingly complex racial politics that we see across America. Many other Americans have a similar account, and racially ambiguous figures such as President Barack Obama and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal are now at the forefront of the American political landscape. Obama’s election as President led to many naïve comments that America has moved to a “post-racial” era where we can stop talking about race.²⁷ And it will be a major challenge for Critical Race Theory to articulate and decipher the racial ambiguity and ambivalence that characterize this era, and to underscore the central role that race still plays in the social, cultural, political, and economic functioning of our society.

Over one hundred years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois prophetically stated that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”²⁸ Today, race in America is just as salient, although much of the backdrop has changed. The shifting demographics of the U.S., along with the rise of

25. My view of “people of color” can include White people. So long as the issue of White privilege is acknowledged and dealt with, White people should be a part of the discussion and the change that needs to occur.

26. In particular, I tried to serve as a mentor to students of color on *Law Review* and teach them what I had learned about article selection at a major law review—a phenomenon which, in my view, is as much a political process as it is an evaluation of an article’s merit. In February 2009, the *NYU Law Review* selected Helam Gebremariam, one of my Articles “little buddies,” as its new Editor-in-Chief. Helam is only the second Black woman to ever hold this position on the *Law Review*.

27. See, e.g., Shelby Steele, *Obama’s Post-Racial Promise*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 5, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05,0,6553798.story>.

28. Du Bois, *supra* n.24 at 3.

neoconservative colorblind ideology and the malleability of roles that racial actors can play, have all tied the proverbial “color line” into a Gordian knot.²⁹ But like any intractable problem, there is a generation of young scholars and activists who are determined to struggle with it. This struggle is about racial justice, but as my narrative has highlighted, it is also about resolving our own identity struggles in the process.³⁰ This may not solve the problem of the color line, but it can lead to progress in the right direction and spark a reawakening for Critical Race Theory. And at this crucial juncture, it is up to us to think critically about race and to continue the long struggle for racial justice in America.

29. This reference derives from a legend associated with Alexander the Great. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordian_Knot.

30. For psychological analyses of how identity development occurs through struggle, see ERIK ERIKSON, *IDENTITY: YOUTH AND CRISIS* (1968), and Margaret Beale Spencer, *Old Issues and new theorizing about African American Youth: A Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory*, in *BLACK YOUTH: PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR STATUS IN THE UNITED STATES* 37 (Ronald L. Taylor, ed., 1995) (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995).

ARTICLES