EXPLORING THE COMMUNICATIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF DESCENDANTS OF ROBERTS SETTLEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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This study used communication theory of identity (CTI) and critical race theory (CRT) to investigate the identities of descendants of Roberts Settlement, an early mixed-race settlement in Indiana. Twenty-four descendants of Roberts Settlement were interviewed to understand how Roberts descendants communicate their identities and how race in the US context has shaped their identities. In-depth interviews were conducted in one-on-one settings; interview transcripts were coded using open and axial coding, as described in grounded theory, and were analyzed according to the four frames and identity gaps of CTI, with consideration to the tenants of CRT.

The findings show that Roberts descendants communicate their identities in diverse ways, notably: their personal racial identities develop over time and are sometimes fluid; their conceptions of family are diverse and tie them to a larger, imagined community, with histories of racial passing affecting degrees of relational closeness; many enact their identities as descendants through attending annual homecomings at the settlement and/or learning about the settlement’s history; and many find significance in their identities as people who belong to the Black community and to the Roberts Settlement community. Participants experienced identity gaps and displayed various negotiation strategies for those gaps.

The findings of this study exemplify the social, cultural, and political forces that create and maintain race in the US, as well as their influence on individual and communal racial identity. As the first research to specifically investigate Roberts descendants, this study provides practical implications for Roberts Settlement as an organization and suggests future research on communication’s role in racial and communal identity development.
Dedicated to the Roberts women
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

I discovered my connection to Roberts Settlement in 2017 during a short conversation with my mother. As a scholar interested in race and identity, I rushed to find as much information as I could about the settlement; and as someone invested in family and history, my search soon became personal. What I discovered during my quest was a community—of people who had overcome great odds, of people who have worked to preserve that history for over 200 years, and of people who also feel connected to those early settlers, who are, as many of us are, moved by the elusive touch of our pasts on our present forms. The discovery of these various communities of which I now was a small part led me to wonder about the many others involved. Who were these people? Did they, too, feel like newcomers? Or were they connected to and conscious of this history their whole lives? How did race connect or disconnect them from other descendants?

Thus, I began this research journey, aware of both my academic and personal stakes, cognizant that when I, by the constraints of language and traditions of research, write “Roberts descendants” below, I mean something more personal, something that indicates a sense of self-inclusion, something more like kin. Throughout these interviews, I formed new connections and reinforced old ones. While I investigated descendants, I learned about myself, and the product of this research is an extension to the larger story of Roberts Settlement. Stories can give voice, reveal similarity of experiences, and help deconstruct racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), and this small segment of the story aims to do just that. So, it is with great care, pride, and gratefulness that I present this research. To begin, this chapter includes the following: (1) background of study (2) rationale, and (3) definition of terms.
**Background of Study**

In the early 1830s, when much of the young state of Indiana was still a frontier, a connection of family and kin began accumulating land in the central part of the state that would become known as Roberts Settlement. Roberts Settlement would grow into one of the largest communities of free people of color in the state and in the Midwest (Vincent, 1999). By the 1850s, the settlement was home to over 200 people and spanned over 1700 acres (Indiana Historical Bureau, 2016). And while racial terror and economic misfortune afflicted other African American settlements in Indiana at the time (Cravey, 2014a; Kunecke, 2014), the people of Roberts Settlement enjoyed modest, yet unusual prosperity as farmers.

A main reason for the Roberts’ isolation and their migration to Indiana was their racial identities. As free people of color, they balanced a precarious line between the oppression of enslaved Black people and free Blacks and the privileges of white people. They enjoyed more freedom than many; yet they did not enjoy the liberties of white people (Vincent, 1999). Throughout the settlement’s history, the middling racial identities of the Roberts and their kin presented them with unique challenges and disadvantages, and, like many free people of color, the specific conditions of their limited freedom contributed to their deep ties and connections with family and kin (Ribianszky, 2017). Both internal pressures of family, belonging, and likeness and external pressures of the racial hierarchy in the US led to their close, even exclusive, bonds—what Edgar Conkling described as a “cultural island” (1957), in which they preserved their own unique racial and familial culture within the boundaries of their physical home.

Over time, as racial definitions in the US shifted more toward a black-white binary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Perea, 1997) the settlement identified more with and was identified more as a Black or African American space, and it is many times remembered as an early
African American settlement (Cravey, 2014a). Stephen Vincent, author of *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African American Farm Communities in the Midwest: 1765-1900* used multiple racial terms to refer to the Roberts and their kin, as their identities shifted over time. He posited that “free people of color” might more accurately describe members as some had no African ancestry, only Native American ancestry.

Eventually, after a few decades of prosperity, the settlement declined in the early 20th century, as the Roberts moved away, many into the nearby towns of Noblesville and Kokomo. Today, what is left of the settlement is Roberts Chapel and cemetery. At the site is a historical marker from the Indiana Historical Bureau, installed in 2016, which offers a brief statement about the people who once lived there (Indiana Historical Bureau, 2016).

Though no one lives on the settlement anymore, people have been gathering at the Roberts chapel for annual homecomings since 1924. Each summer, descendants and friends meet to (re)connect to the present descendants and remember those who came before. Doing so upholds a tradition, a network of relationships that have persisted over centuries. Due to the specific background of this study and the shifting nature of racial definitions over centuries, the following definitions are clarified.

**Definition of Terms**

**Black or African American**— *Black* and *African American* will be used interchangeably (Fields & Fields, 2014; Prewitt, 2013) to speak of people of African descent in the US and people who are racially categorized as Black but may have ancestry from diverse countries and continents. Distinctions between Black as a racial identity and African-American as a cultural identity will be evident in the text. For example, this occurs when participant Taylor identifies with African American culture but does not racially identify as Black.
**Free Blacks**—describes the racial labelling of people who were free before the Emancipation Proclamation, either by being freed from slavery or being born into freedom, who had darker skin than those with other racialized identities, such as multiracial people, and who had a lower position than those with other racialized identities in the 18th century US racial caste (Finkelman, 1989).

**Free people of color**—describes the racialized identity of those with biracial and multiracial identities who were neither slaves nor full citizens (Winch, 2014). As used by Stephen Vincent (1999) and noted in the historical marker by Roberts Chapel (Indiana Historical Bureau, 2016), free people of color will be used to describe the Roberts and their kin before the decline of the settlement.

**Roberts descendant**—describes people who are descended from the kinship network of people who settled the land that became known as Roberts Settlement, as described by Vincent (1999) and Conkling (1957). For the purposes of this study, self-identification as a Roberts descendant was a prerequisite for participation, but no genealogical tracing was completed to confirm self-identification.

**Atlanta, Indiana**—the town in Hamilton County, Indiana in which Roberts Settlement resides. It is approximately 45 miles northeast of Indianapolis, Indiana.

**Noblesville, Indiana**—a city in Hamilton County, Indiana approximately 13 miles south of Atlanta, Indiana.

**Kokomo, Indiana**—a city in Howard County, Indiana, approximately 25 miles north of Atlanta, Indiana.
Rationale

As an exploratory study, the purpose of this research project is to understand and describe how Roberts descendants communicate their identities and to examine how race and racism influence their identities. In doing so, this study investigates not only individual experiences of race and racism, but it also concerns the structural forces of race and racism, and the relationship between the two. Viewing the interconnection of the micro and macro constructions of race through Roberts descendants illuminates the social, political, and cultural institutions that create and maintain race and racism, while highlighting the implications of those institutions on individuals’ identities. This study serves as a kind of case study to illustrate the tangible results of the mechanisms of race-production in the US, a production that is always (re)forming the definitions of race. As scholarship has shown (Burton, et al., 2010; Feagin, 2013) and this study confirms, the consequences of race are far-reaching, as they are worked out on individual, relational, communal, and systemic levels. Thus, this study contributes to the body of critical research that is concerned with the both the structural and individual implications of race, and it offers a glimpse into a micro-community whose lives and whose ancestors’ lives embody a particular lived experience of US racialization.

Additionally, this study serves practical significance to Roberts descendants, many of whom, myself included, find personal significance in family identities. As expressed by many participants, their families and their family histories are integral parts of themselves, and this study will offer insight into the larger community of Roberts descendants, revealing how smaller parts form the whole. This study can help participants connect their stories to the larger community and provide a larger story about Roberts descendants in the present day, the results of which may be the strengthening of relational ties and understanding within this community.
The study is also practically significant to the settlement as an organization, whose full title is Roberts Settlement Church, Burial and Homecoming Association. The organization has a board made of descendants who oversee the preservation of the Roberts chapel and cemetery and the maintenance of contact with descendants, among other things. According to Article 2 of the Roberts Settlement Church, Burial and Homecoming Association’s Constitution,

The object of this organization is to assist in the perpetuation of the cemetery, church and grounds surrounding the church; in addition, the object is to spread information concerning the genealogy and historical life of the community and to secure funds for the upkeep of the same. (2001, para. 2)

This study will help the organization to better understand its members who are descendants, as well as the descendants who are not as relationally or physically close to the settlement.

In relation to academic research, this study expands on literature about the 21st century significance of early African American and mixed-race settlements (Schwalm, 2009), as well as literature about genealogy’s significance on identity (Nash, 2017). In addition, it expands on previous research about Roberts Settlement (Conkling, 1957; Vincent, 1991, 1999) and Hoosier history. Previous research (Conkling, 1957; Vincent, 1999) has offered historical perspectives on Roberts Settlement and provided information about the Roberts’ migration, settling, and eventual decline, with socio-historical analysis. However, there is a lack of research about Roberts descendants in the 21st century, and research has yet to examine Roberts descendants with a communicative perspective. The communicative perspective of this study allows for the examination of identities as primarily communicative phenomena, resulting in attention to the discursive construction of the self and race. A communicative perspective will help explain how people construct their identities through everyday modes of conversation, relational maintenance,
communal relations and self-enactment. The findings of this study connect to broader literature about race and identity in the US, including racial identity development models and paradigms for understanding race. Findings also connect to broader literature on identity and the multifaceted, contextual ways in which identities are lived, performed, and created.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the historical background of this study, as well as the theoretical underpinnings that guide the analysis of race and identity, this chapter reviews the literature of the theories and socio-historical context of this study. First, this chapter addresses two theories, critical race theory and communication theory of identity. Then it contextualizes the study with a background of history concerning race in the US, including racial definitions and early African American settlements. Lastly, it provides an overview about the significance of genealogy and family stories. The information in this chapter traces the intellectual and historical background of this research to better contextualize the current study.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) serves as this study’s theoretical framework, as it will help guide the inquiry of how race and racism shape Roberts descendants’ identities. CRT developed a decade after the Civil Rights Movement, as lawyers, activists, and academics began to name how colorblindness, or viewing race as a nonfactor, disproportionately harmed people of color in the context of law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Because people were unable to “identify the cultural and ethnic character of mainstream American Institutions; they [the institutions] were thus deemed to be culturally and racially neutral” (Crenshaw, et al, 1995, p. xvi). Key figures, such as Mari Matsuda, Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Margaret Montoya, and Richard Delgado contended that racial bias and discrimination permeated every level of American life, and they posited that the institutions were in fact not culturally or racially neutral but that they were systemically flawed in their treatment of race. CRT arose out of a critique of racism at the institutional level, as scholars began uncovering the presuppositions and inner mechanics of systems, such as law and education, that negatively affected people of color. CRT draws from
feminist theory, the Civil Rights Movement, and from the American radical tradition to understand how present reality is shaped by history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

CRT’s roots are in law, but the theory is used in nearly every discipline. Appropriate to this study, CRTforegrounds race and racism in both personal and systemic contexts, as it allows scholars to draw parallels between the two, tracking the mutually influencing and overlapping realms of the individual and the institutional. CRT has been used widely to examine the racialized power structures of a myriad of phenomena. For example, on an institutional level, CRT has been used to critique everything from US sports (Griffin, 2012; Hawkins, et al., 2017), healthcare inequalities (Obasogie, et al., 2017), the construction of whiteness through the law (Haney-López, 2006), America’s legal othering of multiracial people (Colker, 1996), and the census’ role in defining and redefining race and ethnicity (Rodriguez, 2000). On an individual level, it has been used to critique individuals’ perceptions, such as those of faculty about high achieving students (Comeaux, 2013), student activism online (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017), and colorism in families (Burton et al., 2010). With a wide array of applications across disciplines, CRT is useful for both investigating experiences of race and critiquing its production.

Two ideas from CRT enable the theory to account for the ways in which racialized experiences change based on multi-faceted identities and fluidity of identity. These two ideas are intersectionality and multidimensionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in the 1980s to address the ways in which multiple factors of one’s identity, specifically race and sex, influence one’s experiences, as they are contextualized within systems of power. The term “exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice” (Cho, et al., 2013, p. 787) and challenged scholars to
consider the sameness and difference within people, groups, organizations, and systems.

*Multidimensionality*—which some argue is a term that emerged from misinterpretations about the flexibility of intersectionality (Tomlinson, 2018)—describes how people’s dimensions, both expressive and embodied, relate in the context of biased systems (Collins & Solomos, 2010). Because people have intersectional and multidimensional experiences, as the varying components of their identities are at work in any given context, CRT scholars posit that people have “multiple consciousness,” which refers to the ways in which the “multiplicity of social life” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 62) contributes to a diversity of experience within a single individual. Paired with communication theory of identity, multidimensionality relates especially well to this project and to the intersection of the personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames of identity, as it emphasizes the significance of situational context and the reading of identities of that may not be easily ascribable.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) describe some of the tenants or themes of CRT as: racism is ordinary, white supremacy has symbolic and material consequence, race is a social construction, and counter storytelling by people of color offers valid perspectives. Critical race theorists see racism as ordinary, as so deeply embedded and essential to the construction of all American institutions and culture, that the vast majority of people of color experience racism. Along with this, institutions uphold white supremacy and whiteness, which have consequences for all people—legally, educationally, economically, and psychologically, among others ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Another key theme in CRT is the social construction thesis, which posits that “race and races are products of social thought and relations” and “races are categories that society invents, manipulates or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.8). This thesis is important to understanding the history of Roberts Settlement, as well as racial
fluidity in general, within individuals and communities over time. Racial categories and notions of who is considered white and “other” have changed over centuries, as whole groups of people have moved—and been moved—across racial categories, including the Irish (Ignatiev, 2009) Syrians, Armenians, and Mexicans (Haney-López, 2006). Because CRT situates race as a social construction, this study investigates how it is constructed through communication. Lastly, storytelling by people of color about their experiences are valid ways of knowing and understanding the world. That is, the positionality of marginalized people allows them to speak about their experiences. As in this study, the voices of the participants are testimony of their lives.

Therefore, this study’s use of CRT allows for the consideration of the structural productions of race and individual experiences of racialization. Highlighting the social construction of race and multidimensionality of experiences, CRT is a useful framework for understanding Roberts descendants’ identities. So, even while CRT allows for a focus on race and racialized experiences, communication theory of identity allows for a deeper analysis of how identities are created and maintained within individuals.

**Communication Theory of Identity**

Communication theory of identity (CTI) takes a dialectal approach to understanding how two or more areas of our identity may be in opposition at any given time (Hecht, 1993). In this theory, identities are not seen as a single unit but as layered components that can complement or contradict one another, that shift with context and over time. Identity, then, is viewed as a composite of social relations and roles and the resulting social behavior and self-concept (Jung & Hecht, 2004). These social relations, roles, behavior, and self-concept are worked out through communication, as communication and identity are mutually influencing; that is, they create and
are created by one another. By viewing identity through and with communication, CTI can be
used to understand how external, internal, micro, and macro forces form identities (Jung &
Hecht, 2004). In the context of this study, a sampling of composite of identities are considered to
understand a larger composite identity.

CTI moves identity beyond societal and individual perception into the realm of relational
processes (Hecht, 1993). Identity, like race, is something people do as much as they are, and
they do their identities in relation to others. To describe the many ways people do, are, and are
ascribed their identities, CTI uses four frames: personal, communal, enacted, and relational. The
personal frame is an individual’s self-concept. This can include a person’s self-identification,
perhaps of race or their personality. The enacted frame is a person’s expression or performance
of self. This frame encompasses, habits, jobs, clothing choice, and hairstyle, among other things.
The communal frame is a larger, collective understanding of identity and belonging, such as
belonging to a certain region of the country or religious group. And finally, the relational frame
involves the ascribed relational identity, or the internalization of others’ view of the self, and the
identities formed through relationship with others (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Statements about
identifying as an aunt or grandparent would belong to this frame. In this way, CTI allows for the
understanding of identities as relational and multi-faceted phenomena.

This study concerns people who are connected relationally and communally, and CTI
provides a way for contextualizing their identities in relationship to those groups. For example, a
person who identifies as a Black woman (personal frame) might wear a particular hairstyle
(enacted frame) and feel a sense of belonging to a larger community of Black women (communal
frame) that is sustained though affirmations by and relationships with other Black women
relational frame). In this example, all four frames are layered to create an identity in a single point in time. However, sometimes the frames contradict one other.

**Identity Gaps**

Because the frames do not always complement one another, the theory also accounts for identity gaps. Identity gaps “refer to differences between or among different frames of identity” (Wadsworth, et al., 2008. p.68), resulting in tension or discord between one or more frame. With four frames of identity, 11 identity gaps are possible by the interpenetration of one, two, three or four frames at once (Jung & Hecht, 2008), and they take on the names of the frames they exist between, such as the personal-enacted gap or the relational-communal gap. Identity gaps are useful ways of investigating how people experience contextually-based tension within themselves based on the layering of their multiple identities, such their Jewishness and queerness (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), their identities as Koreans and immigrants (Jung & Hecht, 2008), and their identities as transgender individuals (Nuru, 2014). Strategies of dealing with or negotiating identity gaps vary from context to context and can help explain behavior and social relations.

In this study, CTI will be used to understand, in a holistic manner, the personal, relational, performed, and communal identities of Roberts descendants and to identify identity gaps and strategies for negotiating them. Doing so within the frames of CTI and grounded in CRT will allow for an analysis of the multiplicity of Roberts descendants’ experiences.

**Race in the US Context**

Because this study is framed around CRT and CTI, it is possible to investigate race and racism from various angles—from the systemic down to the individual. From its beginning as a colonized land whose indigenous people were killed en masse by white settlers, the US has had a long and pernicious struggle to contend with race within its borders. At its most basic level—a
country that requires citizenship—the US has historically favored white people, as the racial prerequisite of naturalization remained from naturalization’s inception until 1952, and within this biased system, the value of whiteness has always been higher than the value of any other racial identity (Haney-López, 2006). While many hard-fought changes concerning the citizenship, freedom, and rights of people of color have been made since the establishment of the US, critical race theory posits that the present cannot be understood as separate from that past but as a direct result of it. So, in order to understand the experiences of current Roberts descendants and their racial identities, a brief overview of race in the US context follows.

**Historical Overview**

The trans-Atlantic slave trade dramatically restructured life on a global scale, the effects of which are still felt today. One result of the African slave trade to the Americas was a social stratification based on race that privileged white people and oppressed people of color, especially African descended people (Fanon, 1952; Fields & Fields, 2014). After over 200 years of US slavery ended in 1865, a period of Reconstruction followed (Schwalm, 2009), during which sharecropping, slavery’s metamorphosis, persisted through the exploitation of Black labor. For many, sharecropping was a circuitous system that created debt through rent, among other things, and required work to pay off the debt, often through coercion; this created a fine line between indentured servitude and slavery (Daniel, 1994). From the turn of the 20th century to the 1950s, legal segregation, discrimination, and state-sanctioned lynchings kept Black people in social, political, and economic subordination (Feagin, 2006; Haney-López, 2006). It wasn’t until the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that it became illegal to discriminate based on race, among other social categorizations. Although, a legal declaration of racial equality has afforded many positive changes, centuries of discrimination have created racism on a systemic level. Systemic
racism describes the ways in which racism is woven into every social and political institution in the US and is perpetuated on individual, structural, and institutional levels through policy, thought, behavior (Feagin, 2006, 2013). Racism creates and reproduces race and racism (Omi & Winant, 1994) in a cycle with seemingly no end. With an understanding of this historical background, critical race theorists understand that on a systemic level, American institutions were created to be and remain biased against people of color. A main institution through which racial discrimination has persisted is the law.

**Race and the Law**

Like CRT posits, race and racial politics are embedded in all American institutions, but many people, especially white people, view institutions as racially neutral because they are modeled after the dominant racial and ethnic cultures (Peller, 1995). One such institution is law. A summary of three components, slave codes, the census, and anti-miscegenation laws, helps to contextualize the early Roberts’ racial identities and the legal realities of their time.

**Slave codes.** In Antebellum South, slave codes were enacted by state governments to control slaves, free Blacks, and people of color. Having been written into law, slave codes formally institutionalized slavery and racial castes in US (Vandiver, et. al, 2003). They articulated procedures for landownership, court proceedings, and marriages, among other things. The regulations helped preserve white interests and benefitted white people economically, psychologically, and socially (Collins, 1985), regardless of their socioeconomic status by their oppressive regulation of racialized people. Slave codes reinforced racial hierarchies in the south, even as hierarchies were enacted every day at the individual level through everything from nonverbal communication to sensory perceptions (Smith, 2006). In part, the change in slave
codes of North Carolina, that placed more restrictions on the rights of free people of color, was a contributing factor to the Roberts’ initial move out of the state (Vincent, 1999).

**Census.** In addition to slave codes, the census, since its inception in 1790 (Prewitt, 2013), has contributed to the regulation, counting, and racial labelling of racialized people, even as it has reflected the changes in racial understanding that have happened over centuries. The first census and thus the census today is based on the early biological understanding of race and the four race-color groups: black, white, red, and yellow, where three race groups are defined in opposition to the white group, and the white race is white because of its pure quality of not being mixed with other racial groups (Rodriguez, 2000). This census classification system and racial categorization served to create a racial hierarchy and to distinguish insider Americans from outsiders. And the basis of racial classification from the first census was a black-white binary, in which Black and white races were considered opposite, (Prewitt, 2013); this binary persists today.

Races that do not fit neatly into white or black categories have not only been historically extraneous—being added to the census slowly over time—but they have also been difficult to define. Multiracial people have been difficult to place and often are forced by constraints of law or social realities to choose a singular identity (Colker, 1996; Nadal, et al., 2013). The census has reflected and reinforced this binary thinking, as it did not allow people to mark more than one box, or categorize themselves as multiracial, until 2000 (Nadal et al., 2013). The restrictions placed on multiracial people in the census are important, as the census has practical implications for policy and legislation. For example, the census has been used as a basis for immigration regulation (Prewitt, 2013). For multiracial people like the Roberts, navigation in the “…ill-
defined borderlands between bondage and freedom…” (Winch, 2014, p. xiii) was integral to their identities.

**Anti-miscegenation laws.** Another legal imposition in the US, anti-miscegenation laws, which lasted well into the 20th century helped sustain racial hierarchies, too. Because “norms of manhood and womanhood (and their circulation within ideas about sexuality) could only be imagined along racial lines…” (Ehlers, 2011, p. 326), sexuality and thus marriage were understood through the hierarchy of race, which resulted in state laws that prohibited the intermixing of races. While 10 states never had anti-miscegenation laws and 11 repealed their laws before 1900, other states hung on far longer (Gevrek, 2014). Indiana whose law was repealed in 1965 (Schoff, 2009), two years before *Loving V Virginia*, was aberrant among northern states, most of which repealed their laws decades prior. In the landmark case, *Loving V Virginia*, (1967) the supreme court ruled against Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws, ending race-based restrictions for marriage.

**Definitions of Race**

The laws mentioned above helped shape and were shaped by varying definition of race. Race and its many iterations of definitions in the US context have evolved with understandings of science and with social and political movements. But however the definitions have changed, white remains the referent category in the US context (Prewitt, 2013), meaning that race in the US has always been built on a hierarchical system of white vs. other.

**Race as biological.** First, the “otherness” of races was defined as purely biological, as inherent and ascribed at birth. Race was, and still is, in many cases, viewed as a natural, inner part of the being, making the body a text that is obvious and is easily read as one race or the other (Ehlers, 2004). In this view, race is immutable, as it is an inherent characteristic that one
has throughout a lifetime. These views were upheld through race science, which rationalized expansion, chattel slavery, and class differences based on accepted “empirical” reasoning. This included the calculation of Black or racialized blood with categories such as quadroon, octoroons, and mulattos, which were determined by fractions of “black blood”—one-quarter, one-eighth, and so on (Prewitt, 2013; Rodriguez, 2000; Wright, 1956) based on the concept of the “one-drop rule” or hypodescent, that theorized that a single drop or small presence of Black blood taints whiteness (Prewitt, 2013; Rodriguez, 2000). With the biological view, people with social, legal, and political power were able to stratify people based on race, assigning negative qualities to Black people and people of color, while attributing the opposite, positive quality to white people (Haney-López, 2006). In a sense many lay theories of race today still fit into this essentialist perspective, because many people view race as a purely genetic fact (Sanchez, et al., 2015), with little recognition of the other ways race is created.

**Race as social construction.** However stable the biological perspective claims race to be, one need only look at a few court cases, or track a few ethnic or racial populations over time, to see that race has never been stable, but is always shifting and changing to suit the needs of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Race, it turns out, is constructed through human thought and action, including the creation of laws, which have juggled Filipinos, Afghans, Koreans, Syrians, Hawaiians, and Native Americans, and multiracial people, and other racial groups across color lines over the course of centuries (Haney-López, 2006). The multiracial category of free people of color to which the early Roberts belonged no longer exists in its entirety today, because race is not explicitly linked to freedom, rights, and citizenship as it was during their lifetimes. This demonstrates how race evolves, how it is always in the process of being conceived and (re)constructed (Fields & Fields, 2014; Omi & Winant, 1994) through
everything from the senses (Smith, 2006) and movement through geo-political space (Delaney, 1998) to patterns of thinking (Fields & Fields, 2014).

**Race as socio-biological.** While the social construction thesis of race explains how race is maintained through the collective encoding and decoding of bodies as symbols (Omi & Winant, 1994), the related concept of ethnicity also has similar elements of visual, auditory, and heritage-based ascriptions. Ethnicity is unclear, ambiguous, and just as politically motivated as race; it is also fluid (if not more so) than race, and describes sometimes the same characteristics as race, but also holds varying criteria including language, culture, food, religion, and race (Gracia, 2007). However, one main difference between ethnicity and race in the US context is that race is more firmly attached to the physicality of a body (Zelinsky, 2001). Whereas ethnicity may be a set of individual or collective performances or traditions, it is the body that belies race, because race is viewed as “pre-social, pre-discursive “truth” that is anchored in the body and is inescapable” (Ehlers, 2004, p. 314). Therefore, race is not just socially created but is physically enacted and defined, which makes it a socio-biological categorization.

**Early African American and Mixed-race Settlements**

Knowing the history of oppressive racial laws in the US, as well as ways of understanding race helps situate the formation of Antebellum African American and mixed-race settlements, where people of color formed communities with their own racial groups due to the politics of space, power, mobility (Delaney, 1998; Horton, 1993).

By 1850, thirty African American settlements existed in rural areas of the Midwest (Vincent, 1999), populated by free Blacks and formerly enslaved people. Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan were ideal places for settlements because Midwestern states were still forming, and the
land was cheap, slavery was illegal, and nearby religious populations, such as Quakers, were abolitionists (Schwalm, 2009; Vincent, 1999).

Some documented African American and mixed-race settlements were located in Northwest Ohio (Rowe, 2009), Iowa, and the upper Midwest (Schwalm, 2009). In Indiana, a few settlements included Lyles Station in Gibson County (Taylor, 2014), Cabin Creek in Randolph County (Cravey, 2014b), and Burnett in Vigo County (Stokes-Lucas, 2014). Each settlement, usually home to less than 100 people, had unique relationships with white neighbors and varying levels of acceptance by nearby communities. Many settlements sustained themselves through farming and built chapels and churches that doubled as school houses.

A closely related community to Roberts Settlement is Beech Settlement, located only a few miles away. In Vincent’s 1999 book, he traced the origins of both Beech Settlement and Roberts Settlement, as many Roberts and their kin either settled in Beech settlement or intermarried with people at Beech Settlement. Vincent’s (1999) book Southern Seed Northern Soil: African American Farm Communities in the Midwest: 1765-1900 gives a comprehensive history of the Roberts and their kin, beginning in 1765, through their migration north, the growth of the settlement, and its eventual decline. A few key findings in Vincent’s book were the amicable relationships between the Roberts and their white neighbors, the centrality of education and religion within Roberts Settlement, and the ways in which agriculture shaped Roberts Settlement’s success. This work expanded on the early work of Edgar Conkling whose 1957 dissertation Roberts Settlement: A Mixed-blood Agricultural Community in Indiana involved ethnographic interviews with people still living in or around the settlement. Conkling’s work provided insight into the Roberts’ values, highlighted the history of racial passing within the family, and gave profiles about accomplished Roberts Settlement members who became doctors,
lawyers, civic leaders, teachers, and scientists. These two works have been central in documenting and preserving Roberts Settlement history for the general public and for descendants. The importance of these works to Roberts descendants will be explored further in the Results and Discussion chapters.

**Genealogy**

The history of Roberts Settlement, and the history of families, in general, are genealogies. Genealogy serves as the background and basis for this study, and genealogy is the basis for participation in this study. The classic definition of genealogy involves facts, such as dates of birth and death, names, and legal documents, like marriage certificates (Nash, 2017). However, the lines between genealogy and family stories are reworked continually, as the narratives derived from genealogical facts are also considered genealogy (Nash, 2017). In this way, we can see how genealogies are created, perpetuated, and understood through narrative sense-making. For example, Conkling (1957) and Vincent (1999) noted the importance of family stories in the passing down of the Roberts family history, each remarking that homecomings are a time for storytelling and that these acts help Roberts descendants understand their shared past.

**Genealogy through Family Stories**

If genealogies are understood, in part through their narrative sense-making, then they can also be understood as larger family stories that are created, in part, through the micro events of family members telling stories. Family stories make and are made by family. They are communicative processes that reflect and affect family, that help people to make sense of family, even as they help them to make it (Kellas, 2013). Langlier and Peterson’s (2004) work with family storytelling and performance theory has revealed how family stories construct collective and individual identities and preserve larger cultural, and even ethnic narratives of families.
Family stories have multifaceted functions within families, as “family storytelling creates, expresses, and maintains small group culture in interactions across internal and external boundaries that are always moving, relational, and permeable” (Langellier & Peterson, 2006, p. 469). Family stories show a family where they come from and create a shared sense of meaning. This helps maintain group cohesion and establish group and individual identity (Kellas & Trees, 2013). By offering “narrative truths” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), family stories and genealogies have significant implications for personal identities and serve as a way of engagement with or retreat from questions about identity and belonging (Nash, 2002). The relational understanding of identity through CTI helps frame genealogies and family stories as communicative devices that mutually influence personal and collective identity.

**Genealogy as Personal and Communal**

Like identities can be understood as personal and communal in CTI (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011), so too can genealogies be understood this way. Connections are central to genealogy. The connection between personal identity and collective identity situates genealogy in both the private and public spheres. So, genealogy is both personal and communal, as it is a rendering of the self and others in relation to one another.

While the public and private spheres have been theoretically dichotomized in many disciplines (West, Lewis, & Currie, 2009), the public/private distinction is not as discrete when analyzed as a communicative phenomenon (Gal, 2002). Gal asserted that the public and private are “co-constitutive cultural categories” (p. 80) formed discursively. In genealogy, the discursive practice of referring to and being referred to as the collective and the individual creates categories of relatedness that can be understood as occupying both private and public space. Therefore, genealogy is a component of each frame of CTI, as it encompasses identities.
construed within the self and in relation to others. Life-long identity-projects, such as finding personal meaning and significance, can be worked out through genealogy, which acts as a resource through which connections are made and re-made meaningful (Kramer, 2011) by referencing the collective.

**Genealogy as Empirical and Narrative**

Ideas of relationships and connections in genealogy are a testament to the affective and cognitive sensibilities involved in meaning-making. Nash (2002) defines genealogy as a practice “which joins imaginative self-making and guarantees of truth about individual identity” (p. 28). In this way, genealogy is largely based on facts—birth dates, marriages, national origin—and is documented by artifacts—birth certificates, family trees, obituaries—and yet also involves intangible feelings of embeddedness and ‘rootedness’ (Kramer, 2011). Nash (2002) noted the truthfulness of both the empirical and the imaginative in genealogy. The cumulative weight of genetics, DNA, and archival research *and* personal stories and social bonds results in the (re)construction of genealogy. Empirical truth and narrative truth, which are often viewed as at odds with one another (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), are combined to form a genealogical truth for an individual. Tutton (2004) found that people used knowledge from genetic ancestry tests in addition to, not in lieu of, less-scientific claims of family stories and folklore to construct a sense of identity. In this study, both the empirical and narrative qualities of genealogy are explored, as participants often use both to weave tales of the many layers of their identities.

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, CRT contextualizes and explains the production and maintenance of race in the US by examining historical, systemic functions of race and its effect on individuals. CRT helps frame an understanding of race in the US context, including the construction of race across
centuries and the shifting definitions of race that accompanied changing laws and perspectives. CTI situates identities as relational processes that involve personal, relational, communal, and enacted characteristics; CTI helps frame an understanding of genealogy and family stories, which are integral to understanding the self and the self in relation to a collective, as the participants of this study were asked to disclose. Together, CRT, CTI, and an understanding of genealogy and family stories contextualize the history of Roberts Settlement and the racial identities of its inhabitants and descendants. The theoretical and historical framework of this study further the understanding of the current participants, whose interviews were analyzed by means of the methodology explained in the next chapter to answer the following research questions.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: How do Roberts descendants communicate their identities?

RQ1A: How do Roberts descendants negotiate their sense of self?

RQ1B: How do Roberts descendants co-communicate their identities relationally?

RQ1C: How do Roberts descendants express their identities?

RQ1D: How do communities help shape Roberts descendants’ identities?

RQ1E: How do Roberts descendants negotiate identity gaps, should they experience identity gaps?

RQ2: How has race in the US context shaped Roberts descendants’ identities?
CHAPTER 3. METHOD

Grounded Theory

With this project’s research questions in mind, I used constructivist grounded theory as a method to guide the research process. Grounded theory is the iterative process of deriving theory from data by way of data collection, coding, and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since its inception, grounded theory has become a prominent, qualitative methodology with a plethora of applications. Several iterations of grounded theory have expanded its definitions (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1991), and it is constructivist grounded theory that I used as a method in this study, which allowed me to engage in the systematic and simultaneous processes of collection and analysis of data.

According to Charmaz (2017), the constructivist version of grounded theory is ideal for critical qualitative inquiry because it “locates the research process and product in historical, social, and situational conditions” (p. 34). This constant locating of the research within contexts allowed me not only to be aware of how this study was speaking to or connecting with past studies, but also allowed analysis of me as the researcher and the participants to be contextually based. In this way, the context of each interview and the interaction of our identities could be questioned and probed for meaning. Constructivist grounded theory as method allows for the constant analysis of both human and nonhuman elements involved in the study, so it complements CTI in engaging the subjective realities of the participants and CRT in the analysis of space, laws, and institutions. Additionally, grounded theory was appropriate for this study, because it allowed the research to be centered on the process of identity-making and the construction of self that takes place within specific sociohistorical contexts. Charmaz (2017) explained:
Constructivist grounded theory developed from pragmatist values promoting social justice. By providing analytic tools to probe how events, processes, and outcomes are constructed, the method provides a means of studying power, inequality, and marginality. This method aids in explicating research participants’ implicit meanings and actions along with those buried in policies and organizational texts. Through moving back between theorizing and collecting data while using comparative methods, the level of abstraction and complexity of the analysis increases. (p. 139)

Because of this, grounded theory supports both CRTs inquiry of power and inequality and CTIs inquiry into the identity making process. Using the tools of memo writing and coding, I used grounded theory to identify levels of abstraction from the data (Charmaz, 2006), and from this close interaction with the data, I emerged with new insights about the participants and, even, myself, as grounded theory also centers a reflexive consideration of the “methodological self-consciousness” (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). Constant reflexivity, aided through many methods, such as note-taking and creative writing, allowed me to better understand my positionality and my influence on the research.

**Positionality.** As a Roberts descendant, myself, this research is inherently self-reflexive. Grounded theory, like other qualitative approaches, positions the researcher as the primary research instrument, resulting in the naturalizing of reflexivity in the research process. Thus, the researcher and the data are in constant conversation (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theory component of memoing requires the researcher to be in constant connection with the data and their own evolving interpretations of the data. Through memoing, researchers “analyse their ideas about their codes and emerging categories in whatever way that occurs to them (emphasis added)” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 188) during all stages of research. Memoing, then, marks both the
development of the research and the researcher (Bryant, 2017). I evolved as a researcher during this research process, and in some ways evolved relationally with other descendants.

Because this study involved a community of which I am part, I approached this research with radical subjectivity, which is, among other things, a tenant of womanism (Walker, 1983), or Black feminism. As a Black woman scholar of critical and qualitative inquiry, I do consider this to be a feminist work in that it was conducted and presented with a feminist ethics of care. So, I approached this research with radical subjectivity, and this created more opportunity for deeper analysis of the interviews and my role in them, as well as my role in interpreting the data during analysis. A few ways I did this was through noting in the memoing process how I felt my identity or relationship with the participation influenced the interview and by asking myself the interview questions before the interviews began to better understand my positionality.

The second interview question on the schedule of questions asked participants how they learned about the settlement. I answered this way, which further explains my positionality: I first learned of Roberts Settlement early in 2017 at 23 years old. I did not grow up in central Indiana, where much of my family lives and where Roberts Chapel is located. Instead, I grew up in southern Indiana in a predominately white town, where I, as a Black girl, negotiated my racial identity amid an overwhelming white majority. Now, my parents live in Kokomo, Indiana, and when I visit, I often make the drive between their house and my sister’s. On this drive down US 31, I pass Roberts Chapel, where it is tucked, not even a mile off of 276th street. I had driven past 276th street hundreds of times before I had learned of my connection to Roberts Settlement. Now that I know what history took place down that street, before there even was a street, I find new meaning and personal significance from that drive.
From this small segment of my story and the engagement in reflexivity and radical subjectivity, I was able to understand how my identity allowed me to connect with other descendants, especially those who had grown up in predominately white towns, or who are Hoosiers, or who only recently discovered the settlement. Like the drive down US 31 has taken on new meaning because of my newfound knowledge, my perception of the interviews and the data were influenced by my identity and my experience. Grounded theory, as an inherently self-reflexive method (Charmaz, 2006), allowed me to investigate my relationship with the data and participants in a way that ultimately led to deeper understanding.

Lastly, on a practical level, my positionality also allowed me to quickly form connections that assisted me in the recruiting process and with other information that might have been more difficult to access had I not been a Roberts descendant.

**Permission from Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The protocol and materials for this study, including the consent form (See Appendix A), the schedule of questions (See Appendix B), debriefing form, and recruiting materials were submitted to the Bowling Green State University’s Institutional Review Board on October 3 and received approval on October 23, 2017 (Project # 1137506-2, See Appendix C).

**Approval from Roberts Settlement Board**

In addition to IRB approval, this study received approval from the Roberts Settlement Board. These 22 board members, all Roberts descendants themselves, serve as leadership within this community. They oversee programming and outreach efforts for the settlement, plan and execute annual homecomings, and maintain the Roberts Settlement property. Because of their integral role in preserving the history of the settlement and in connecting descendants, I sought their approval for this study. After speaking with the president of the board, the president gave
verbal approval on behalf of the Roberts Settlement board and organization. In addition, with the help of a few board members, information about the study was emailed to all board members of the settlement on November 13, 2017. Soon after, at a scheduled time, board members who were willing and able joined a conference call, during which I answered any questions or concerns that they had about the study.

**In-Depth Interviews**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews allowed me to draw rich descriptions of the experiences of the participants in ways that surveys and other methods could not. Interviews facilitated an understanding of each participant’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lofland and Lofland (1984) described an interview as a directed conversation. With a schedule of questions, I guided the conversation with the participants in a way that allowed their stories, accounts, and explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to be centered in the moment of the interview. According to Charmaz (2006), interviewing and grounded theory complement each other because they are both “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” (p. 28). Interviews served as an ideal tool to explore the varied experiences of the participants in a way that provided both structure and freedom along with pre-planned goals and emergent directions. Each interview flowed differently, and through the process of winding through the questions and discovering new ones, the dyad—the interviewee and me—created an original conversation and storied experience that contributed new meaning to the larger voices of the participants.

A few examples of interview questions are below:

What made you interested in participating in this study?

How and when did you learn about Roberts Settlement?
How do you identify racially?

Is your identity as a(n) [insert race] person significant to you? Why or why not?

Can you describe a time when your race affected your life in some way?

**Interview Settings and Tools**

Each in-person interview was conducted in a private environment. One interview took place in a private room at the Noblesville Public Library in Noblesville, Indiana. Five interviews were conducted at participants’ homes in Noblesville and Kokomo, Indiana. And 19 interviews were conducted via phone. The interviews were conducted from November 25, 2017 to January 28, 2018 and ranged from 35 to 70 minutes. The range of mediated and non-mediated interviews allowed me to reach people from geographically diverse areas. Lindlof & Taylor (2011) noted the similarities between mediated and non-mediated interviewing techniques and concluded that both are useful as methods of eliciting responses from participants.

The interviews were captured on a digital audio recorder and/or a phone recorder. Physical copies of debriefing forms were given to in-person participants, and digital copies were emailed to phone participants. To ensure the participants’ confidentiality, all recordings of interviews were transferred to a password protected laptop the same day of the interview, along with scanned copies of the physical consent forms from in-person interviews. At the end of each session, participants were offered the chance to designate a pseudonym of their choosing for their identity; participants who did not designate a pseudonym were assigned a pseudonym to separate their name and identity from their responses.

**Participant Selection**

To participate in this study, individuals had to be 18 years or older and self-identify as Roberts descendants. Genealogy, or the tracing of any history, including intellectual history, is
an ambiguous and uncertain enterprise (Sembou, 2015). Genealogy and family history, as well, embody this uncertainty. The availability of historical records and the construing of family narratives and personal identities create multiple layers of rationalizations for meaning, belonging, and kinship (Nash, 2016). Because of the multifaceted nature of family and idiosyncratic ways of determining group membership, in this study I did not verify empirical evidence of Roberts ancestry. Rather, personal claim in Roberts ancestry was accepted as truth, because it was the phenomenon of identifying as a Roberts descendant that was of interest.

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling to select participants. After gaining approval from the IRB and Roberts Settlement’s board, I recruited via my personal Facebook page. I also worked with two board members to recruit by posting in the Roberts Settlement Facebook page. Board members sent out the call to participate via the Roberts Settlement email list. Lastly, I recruited through snowball sampling at the end of each interview. Because this study is not preoccupied with generalizability, this sampling technique allowed me to utilize a network of Roberts descendants to reach a population that might have otherwise been difficult to reach. I continued collecting data until I reached theoretical saturation at 24 interviews, when no new or relevant themes were emerging from the data (Saumure & Given, 2008).

**Memoing**

Though the memoing process and product can differ for each researcher and project (Bryant, 2017), the premise of constant reflection and interpretation remains the same (Glaser, 1992). For this project, I engaged in memoing after each interview. I did this by recording my initial thoughts about the interview on the digital recorder. These notes were stored alongside the interview audio on the password protected laptop. In the audio notes after each interview, I
commented on aspects of the interview such as what stood out about the latest interview, what stories and/or themes I heard, how the latest interview differed or complemented past interviews, how the questions in the protocol were effectively or ineffectively prompting responses, and what I would try to improve as an interviewer in the coming interview. In addition to these audio notes after each interview, I also took written notes throughout the transcribing process, as I began to discover themes and understand how the interviews were speaking to one another. These memos included repeated words and phrases and common descriptions or impressions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began as early as the interviews when I began memoing and organizing information during the collection stage. The interviews were transcribed, totaling 191 single-spaced pages in Word. I then began analyzing the interviews with the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO. In NVIVO, I uploaded the interview transcripts and then engaged in the coding process. Qualitative codes demonstrate the interpretation of data, which involves a process of selection and sorting. Codes fragment data into segments, name, and then categorize them in order to interpret them to further levels of abstraction (Charmaz, 2006). In this coding process, I conducted open and axial coding, (Strauss & Corbin, 1991) through which I first began to label and name the phenomena indicted in the interview transcripts, confirmed the categories and labels by comparison and consolidation, and situated them within the four frames of CTI. An example of codes can be seen below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Example Coding Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active Participation in Roberts Settlement community</th>
<th>Engaging in activities with Roberts Settlement</th>
<th>“We always went to homecomings. It was a pretty big deal.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being involved on the board of Roberts Settlement</td>
<td>“I’ve probably gone to almost every homecoming during my lifetime probably.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being on committees through the board</td>
<td>“I’m 66 years old, and I’ve been involved for 66 years.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending homecomings</td>
<td>“When I got back that was one of the first things I wanted to do was to be more participatory. And so I wanted to be on the board, and I was chosen to be on the board.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling others about Roberts Settlement</td>
<td>“I tell everybody I can any chance I get.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Poetic Transcription**

After analyzing information through coding, I also analyzed data through poetry. Approaching this research with radical subjectivity allowed me to fully enter in the research process with my strengths, including poetry, which I frequently use in my personal life and have used in research about Roberts Settlement before (Peters, 2017). In addition to traditional prose
transcriptions of each interview, I selected passages from each interview and engaged in poetic transcriptions. Poetic transcription can further represent the speaker’s voice, convey a story’s layered meanings, and make data and themes more accessible (Faulkner, 2009). According to Madison (2005), “In poetic transcriptions, words are not in isolation from the movement, sound and sensory dimensions that enrich their substance” (p. 207). The embodiment and situated nature of the narratives (K. Langellier & Peterson, 2004) were central this project, because it focuses on the lived experience and living history of this community, so poetic transcriptions represent their voices in a tangible way by attending to details of the interviews such as breath, sound, and important meanings and words (Faulkner, 2018; Madison, 2005).

I read the transcripts, marked segments that represented the participants or were interesting about the interview, and then I rearranged those passages into poetic lines, paying attention to elements like the cadence of the participants’ voices and significant words within the narratives. Doing so helped me to further consider the emerging themes. I also engaged in poetic transcriptions with segments of interviews in which the participants spoke about the same place, person, or event. Arranging their stories side by side in poetry allowed me to further understand how the participants were in conversation with each other. Lastly, poetic transcriptions allowed me to capture the visual channels of the narratives (Madison, 2005), such as pictures participants showed me of their families during and after interviews. In this way, the poems serve as a representation of family artifacts that were not collected during the research process. Examples of poetic transcription are below and are present throughout the Results.

The Barbershop: Minuet and Evette

He worked at a barbershop
your great-grandfather.
He cut my hair.
there’s this picture
of how he cut it.
My mother never knew
what to do with my hair.

He got so old
and quit cutting hair
lost the barbershop
I don’t remember how
people don’t even appreciate
white and black went there
and got their hair cut
you ever see a picture of him?

That’s a Black Thing: Ali

Calling everybody
aunt and uncle
even when they’re not related
that’s a Black thing
Eating,
family reunions,
being loud,
those are Black things.
We do things our own way
in our own time.
When you’re Black
your thought process
is different.
You think Black.
Don’t think somebody
ain’t thinking your Black
cause as soon as you are
somebody’s gonna remind you
that they’re thinking
you’re Black.
We’ve been so persecuted,
when the outsider gets persecuted
we’re like, hey, join us.
fix a plate.
We understand.

Birth Certificates: Taylor
My father’s says Negro  
and probably the youngest  
of his siblings says African American.  
Mine says Caucasian.  
In Texas, 1 generation before ’49,  
my grandfather’s says—  
I’ve seen it, we have it—  
C-O-L-L-A-R-D.  
Ain’t white, he’s a collard.

Picture: Roselyn

There’s a picture of me  
with my sister and rother  
a picture of us at the homecoming.  
Mother always dressed me and my sister just alike  
I hated it because I grew faster.  
I was already old,  
moving quick.

We’re in dresses and in white  
I have this look on my face like:  
I don’t want my picture taken  
in this dress that looks like my sister’s.  
Ha! I was already old,  
moving quick.

Poetic transcriptions like these allowed me not only to capture the voice of the participants but also to understand the themes, stories, and ideas that were important in their interviews. Ultimately, this process helped me to better connect to the data throughout the analysis process.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides a description of the research process of this study. My positionality is explained as radically subjective, given my connection not only to the participants and the settlement but also my claim as a feminist, critical, qualitative scholar. Using constructivist grounded theory as a method, I interviewed 24 Roberts descendants via phone and in person. I
transcribed the interviews in both traditional prose and in poetic ways, and, using NVIVO, coded the data within the four frames of CTI. According to this method, I emerged with the results that are presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

To understand how Roberts descendants communicate their identities and how race shapes the construction of their identities, 24 descendants were interviewed, and their interviews were coded for analysis with both CRT and the four frames of CTI—personal, relational, enacted, and communal—as guides. This chapter describes the results of the analysis. First, the chapter includes two tables that give an overview of the participants’ racial identities and preview the themes and subthemes found in analysis. Second, the chapter describes the themes and subthemes of the data. Below is an overview of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Participant’s Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daine</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evette</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Biracial, Black and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lory</td>
<td>Biracial, Black and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marley</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>Biracial, Black and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minuet</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roselyn</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safia</td>
<td>Biracial, Black and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Below is an overview of the themes found during the coding process.

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Layer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Racial identity development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1: Racial awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 2: Racial struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 3: Racial acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Fluidity of racial self-identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Personal significance of Roberts heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal-Enacted Identity Gap</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational Layer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: “When I find out we family, we family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1: Geographical influence on closeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: “The difference between knowing and <em>knowing</em>.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: “They vanished off the face of the earth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational-Personal Identity Gap</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misinterpreting race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational-Enacted Identity Gap</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enacted Layer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Genealogy and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Participation in Roberts Settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1: Board and committee membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 2: Special projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 3: Homecomings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 4: Telling others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Participation in racial communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enacted-Communal Identity Gap</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communal Layer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: The Black community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1: “I’m proud to be Black; it’s just the struggle”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 2: “We always overcome”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Roberts Settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 1: Past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 2: Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme 3: Future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Communal-Relational Identity Gap
Negotiation

### Communal-Personal Identity Gap
Negotiation

### Race in the US Context
Theme 1: Race and the law
   - Subtheme 1: Anti-miscegenation laws
   - Subtheme 2: Legal records
   - Subtheme 3: Legal racial discrimination

Theme 2: Lived experience

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### Personal Layer

To review, the personal layer describes how identity is a characteristic of an individual and includes a person’s self-image and self-definitions. According to the personal layer, identities are hierarchically ordered within specific contexts, they are ascribed by the self and others, and they cause expectations and motivations (Hecht, 1993). Interviews revealed three main themes in the personal layer of the participants’ identities, (1) racial identity development, (2) fluidity of racial self-identification, and (3) personal significance of Roberts heritage.

Because of the multiracial nature of Roberts Settlement and the continuing diversification of its diaspora, Roberts descendants experience varying negotiations of their racial identities, often influenced by key elements, such as their parents’ race(s), the time period in which they were children and adolescents, the place(s) where they have lived, and their phenotypical features.

Each participant was asked to disclose their racial self-identification, and the majority of the participants also disclosed stories of how race has affected their lives or is currently affecting their lives. From these two questions and from ideas expressed throughout the interviews, I found that a most salient component of the Roberts descendants’ personal identities was their
racial identity. Specifically, many addressed an evolution of their racial identities over time and a fluidity of their understanding of themselves racially.

**Racial Identity Development**

Many participants expressed an evolution of their racial identities over time. This evolution was coded into three categories, which represent the stages that many participants expressed: (1) racial awareness, (2) racial struggle, and (3) racial acceptance.

**Racial awareness.** Many participants of color expressed an early consciousness of their race. As participant Christopher said, “I saw it (race) early on, just like everybody else Black did….We gained racial consciousness at an early age.”

One participant, May, recounted the early age at which she began to think of herself as Black. She described first grade at her predominately white school as “the first time when I had this identity crisis about, why am I not like everybody else?” May became aware of her racial identity, its presence and significance, at an early age in part because it was an element of difference in a predominately white town in Indiana.

However, even coming of age in predominately Black spaces, participants of color recounted an early recognition of their racial identities. Ursula, who grew up in a predominately Black town, said, “I always just knew I was African American.” Many participants offered similar expressions, which described a recognition of their race that came so early, it felt instinctual and reflexive. As Nikki said, “No matter how we’re raised or what we feel or what we’re taught, when you see someone, there’s a color that you see.” In the US context, where race is a primary means of identifying people, participants of color became cognizant of their skin color and racial identities early in their lives.
Racial struggle. Many participants indicated their feelings of otherness, their self-consciousness, and negative self-directed thoughts about their race, which were coded as racial struggle. The majority of participants spoke of their racial struggle in the past tense and described their negative feelings in relation to childhood or early adult encounters and experiences.

For instance, May who was quoted about as coming to know her racial identity in first grade, went on to say, “I can remember being really young, saying my prayers at night and wanting to wake up like everybody else.” The early consciousness of her race became a sense of shame for her, so much so that she prayed to change her appearance. As she described, “I felt I’m apart, I’m different.” Minuet, too, said, “I know what it is to be made to feel different.”

The internalization of external conceptions of race negatively affected many participants, including Miles, who said, “Growing up, it was always like, we felt, or at least I did, lower class, because our African American ancestry, and that was just inherent. So, we always felt a tier below the white kids, so to speak.”

The feeling of having a lower status compared to white peers and white neighbors was one commonly described by participants when they spoke of early childhood experiences. This was described across geographical regions and time periods.

Here, we see the overlapping of the personal and relational frame, as the relational and even communal reality of belonging to neighborhoods and school systems with majority white residents affected the personal self-image and self-concept of the descendants. Miles’ relational identity as a biracial student in a predominately white, rural school affected his self-image differently than Ursula’s relational identity as a Black student in a segregated Black school. As the personal frame houses self-image, other identity layers help create that self-concept.
**Racial acceptance.** The majority of participants who expressed struggles with their racial identities also expressed a sense of resolution to those struggles. Additionally, the majority of the participants who did not disclose struggles with their racial identities also indicated strong, positive feelings about their racial identities.

Crystal, who expressed an early unease with her racial identity as a Black person came to say, after years of learning about herself and growing more comfortable with herself:

It’s nice to know that I’m African American, that that’s in me, that I’m this strong, ambitious person, and I know that’s because I feel good about who I am—the color of my skin, how tall I am, how much weight I am, how big my smile is, how much I know. I know that all of that encompassed together with my color—that’s beast mode. You can’t stop that.

Her internal struggle was eventually mitigated by her choice to accept and love her whole self, including her race, as she said, “You have to know who you are. You have to love who you are. And African American is it for me. I like it. I used to be uncomfortable, but now I like it. I really like it.” Jamaica also came to a sense of acceptance of her racial identity, stating, that, though she was not confident about being Black as a child, eventually, “I started thinking of myself as a Black girl versus thinking of myself as a *Black girl*. It was a different connotation, in a positive light.”

Miles, too, who spoke of his past discomfort as a biracial person, had this to say about his biracial identity presently: “I just feel fortunate. I feel very fortunate,” indicating his acceptance of his racial identity later in life. As noted in many racial identity development models (Cross, 1978; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000), a resolution of negative, internal identity conceptions or sense of belonging within a racial community or communities can happen over time. For many
participants, their racial identities sparked intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict—but they also engendered feelings of pride and acceptance. This highlights the results of many participants’ reclamation of their racial identities from solely oppressive identities to diverse and valid racial and/or ethnical experiences. The experiences of many multiracial people is that establishing belonging within racial communities can be difficult (Renn, 2000), leading to a greater fluidity of racial identification than many monoracial people.

**Fluidity of Racial Self-Identification**

In expressing a fluidity of racial identification, participants indicated a sense of agency and ownership about their racial identities. On one level, this fluidity was expressed through the way people, especially older participants, described their experiences of being racialized through various racial terms. On another level, some participants described a fluidity of their racial self-identification that occurred throughout their lifetimes.

Many participants used Black and African American interchangeably as a racial label, noting that each label accurately described them. William said, “I identify as African American or Black. I’ve had some good debates with people over time. Are we Black or are we African American?” The question was followed with the observation that, “if you had asked a person from Roberts Settlement this question 3 generations ago, they probably would have said, I’m colored, I’m mixed. They didn’t want to be Black. Because that meant a whole different set of issues that they had to deal with in their lifetime.”

Daine said that she identifies as African American, then said, “Actually I just call it Black because I'm old school…When I was growing up we called ourselves Negros. That's what we were, or either we were colored.”
However, others took care to distinguish between Black as a racial category and African American as an ethnic identity, particularly when the participants themselves did not have both a Black racial and an African American ethnic identity.

One example of this was Taylor whose father is legally a Black person with very light skin and whose mother is white. Taylor self-identifies as white and not biracial. As he said:

So his [Taylor’s father’s] birth certificate says Negro, which makes me legally 50% Black, even though no one in their right mind would assume or label or address me. Society will always and only treat me as a white man…. I identify with African American culture lots and lots and lots, but I don’t identify as a Black person, because sociologically, I am not. People will never treat me as anything but a White man. So, I recognize that objectively, understand that that’s the way things are, so racially I am not.

Taylor described that coming to this conclusion was a journey of sorts, because from an early age, he had to “figure out” who he was. He noted that most people do not have to do this, because their racial identity is more apparent, echoing what many of the participants with monoracial identities said about their early racial awareness.

The participants who expressed the most fluidity of their self-concept of their race identified as biracial. As Jordan said, “self-identification in the Roberts has defined us. It has defined the Roberts and all their generations,” because of their racially middling identities. For many, this was described as a journey of sorts. Their individual journeys were nuanced based on phenotypical features, environment, and age.

Jordan, who identifies as biracial said:

It took me a long time to come to terms with how I should identify myself as I do. I really don’t think I do identify myself as anything. I tend to shy away from that subject. But
when I’m around my family, like at Roberts Settlement, I proudly boast that I’m African American. I come from Elijah. Proudly. But when I’m not with them, I feel like I’m out of my comfort zone and I tend to shy away from and just stay in my own little group. For Jordan, identifying racially is not a stable or constant phenomenon but is dependent on context. He described several ways in which his self-identification has changed over the years, stating that, “I identified as Black and white in the military. But before I turned 20, I didn’t identify as anything.” He went on to describe how when he was young and around his father’s side of the family, the Roberts side, he tended to identify as Black, and when he lived with his mother, he identified as white, but he identified mostly as what others around him identified him as. Likewise, Lory who is biracial noted that she feels like she identifies as “Black or light skinned Black,” although she also identifies as biracial or multiracial if she has the choice.

These few anecdotes exemplify both the larger changes in racial nomenclature over time and the role of self-identification within the personal layer of identity. As seen above, self-identification is a process that changes over time, that is both self-determined and influenced by ascriptions by others. For Roberts descendants, racial fluidity and self-identification are an accessible and integral component of their family history in Roberts Settlement.

**Personal Significance of Roberts Heritage**

The last theme within the personal layer encompasses how the majority of participants revealed that their identities as a Roberts descendant are important and significant parts of their lives. Several participants who had recently discovered their Roberts heritage said they were not yet sure how significant their identity as Roberts descendants are, but each indicated that they anticipated further learning about their heritage would strengthen their feeling of its significance. The words “pride” and “proud” were used frequently to describe personal feelings about being
Roberts descendants, as Roselyn stated, “I’m a proud descendant,” and Minuet said, “I’m just a Roberts descendant. I’m proud that I am and that we have all this history. I’m proud of that, very proud of that.”

Others noted that being a Roberts descendant was significant because it contributed positively to their self-regard, seemed to explain something about their identities, or as Crystal said, knowing about Roberts Settlement makes her feel like she has something.

Miles said that learning of his Roberts heritage helped him to understand that he came from something other than “dysfunction”—the dysfunction in his immediate family and the dysfunction of the heritage of Black American slavery. May expressed similar pride, and questioned, “Why didn’t I know this in high school? Why didn’t I know this when I was struggling to sort of fit in? It’s so powerful to know your history. It gives you just like this strength that’s unbelievable.”

For Miles and May, their identities as Roberts descendants helped strengthen their view of themselves when they were struggling with their racial identities. Others too, including William and Jamaica, noted that Roberts Settlement has helped them to better understand themselves.

For Caitlin, learning that she was descended from the settlement and from African American ancestry, gave her a new sense of self. She said, “It's something that I kind of was hoping for as a teenager. I really hated being white, so when I first discovered that [Black ancestry], it was pretty neat for me. It explained a lot about myself.” Others also noted that their self-identification as Roberts descendants added positively to their personal lives.

Within this theme we see an interpenetration of the personal and communal frames. The communal identity of belonging to descendants of Roberts Settlement has, for many people,
positively influenced the self-image. The group belonging of Roberts descendancy has
influenced not only group identity positively but also self-identity, as the reference group
becomes a tool to explain individual characteristics and positionality. However, personal
significance of Roberts heritage within the personal layer creates room for a disconnect between
that significance and the enactment of that identity.

**Personal-Enacted Identity Gap**

According to Hecht et al. (2005), the personal-enacted identity gap occurs when there is a
“discrepancy between an individual’s self-view and the same individual’s enactment of self in
communication with others” (p. 269). Analysis revealed that this gap occurred in mainly two
ways, resulting in various negotiating tactics. The first way that participants were found to
experience identity gaps was between their self-regard as Roberts descendants and the enactment
of their identities as Roberts descendants. As mentioned above, most participants expressed that
being a Roberts descendant was significant to them. However, some participants commented on
the ways in which they felt they did not express or enact that identity.

Not attending homecomings was a common way that participants felt they did not enact
their identities as descendants, either that they had sporadically attended or never attended.

Kathryn said that to her, attending homecomings is a duty, saying:

My dad’s mother
is a Roberts,
so ever since I was little
I’ve known.
I’ve known what I was supposed to do
and what is required of me,
being a descendent.

It’s required
that we come back to the reunion
and we’re supposed to
bring other descendants back.
That’s the purpose
of coming to Roberts Settlement’s reunion
to bring back the—
Cause some people…
left…and have never come back.

Kathryn expressed a feeling of duty and obligation not only to attend homecomings but also to play a role in inviting other descendants who have been separated from the settlement. For many participants who did not attend homecomings, their absence created a tension between the personal and enacted frames. All participants who had never attended a homecoming expressed interest in attending, noting that it was something that other Roberts descendants did, and they wanted to be involved in as well.

**Negotiation.** Even when they felt they were not enacting their identities as Roberts descendants by attending homecomings, participants negotiated this tension by using other means of forming connections or staying connected to other Roberts descendants and the settlement. Many participants who had never been to a homecoming actively researched about the settlement via Vincent’s (1990) book, the Roberts Settlement website, and the Roberts Settlement Facebook page. Engaging in these activities allows them to mitigate what tension or discomfort they may have for not attending homecomings. For example, Christopher said that while he has not attended a homecoming, he has read the book and stays connected via the Facebook page. He said that these resources provide information for him and his family, even though they have never been physically or relationally close to other descendants.

The second way the personal-enacted gap was expressed was through the personal knowledge of racial heritage and the enactment of racial identity. Participants who mentioned taking a DNA test expressed some form of conflict caused by knowing their genetic makeup.
Crystal who identifies as Black explained how finding out from her DNA that she is 20% Caucasian was uncomfortable. Because Crystal enacts her identity as a Black person, discovering that she has this percentage of Caucasian DNA created a sense of discomfort, as she struggled to reconcile those two seemingly disparate ideas. She said,

“It’s kind of weird…We’re like 20% Caucasian from great Britain….I didn’t think it was gonna be that much. I thought it would be a little bit, but it was a lot. I think I’m African American, but I know I’m a whole bunch of other stuff too. I’m like do I have to like Trump now? [laughs] Does that mean I’m a traitor a little bit? [laughs]

Likewise, William mentioned that as a Black man, his multiracial heritage is disconnected from the way he enacts his monoracial identity. He said:

I never even thought about being mixed, having mixed blood, if you will, until we did a DNA test…and I saw how much actual European DNA I have in me. But that doesn’t change how I see myself racially, because it’s been more influenced by culture. And I’ll have people ask me this question a lot of times, ‘Well you could be, you could say you’re this, you could say you’re that.’ I say, ‘Well I could I suppose, but I wouldn’t.’ And I could probably say, yes I could very easily relate to a European American culture, because we live in that every day—but in my soul, I guess if you will, that’s not how I feel. I don’t feel as connected to that Irish or Scottish or German DNA that is there, because of how my daily existence has been.

William’s response reveals that he experiences tension between his self-concept as a Black man, his personal knowledge about his DNA, and his everyday expression of his Black identity. William acknowledges the possibility that he could potentially claim or identify with his
European ancestry, but instead the enactment of his Black identity, both racially and culturally, prevents that from happening.

The opposite was true for both Taylor and Caitlin who discussed how the expression of their white racial identities were not fully able to encompass the diversity of their DNA and family history. Caitlin said:

When you're doing all this genealogy and you're a white girl and you see all these census records that say Mulatto or you get to 1850 and they're Black, and then they change through the decades, and they wind up White, and you see pictures of people that are your ancestors or of your aunts or great uncles and what not, and cousins, and you're like, wow. I tend to get robbed of some of the darker skin, I guess you can say…

In this, Caitlin expresses how her self-concept of her racial and genetic makeup are not accurately portrayed or able to be expressed in the color of her skin. Taylor also expressed that the color of his skin, or the expression of his racial identity does not capture his self-concept as a white man who identifies heavily with African American culture.

**Negotiation.** Most participants did not express a negotiation tactic for this gap, only that they have come to accept their positionality as people with racial heritages that do not reflect their self-identification. Charles’ negotiation of this gap might be described as enacting his racial identity in a more ethical or morally informed way than before. He identifies as white and said, “I would only mark myself white and Black if it was not lend itself to creating a sense of diversity where there isn’t any.” He went on to describe how knowing this heritage does affect his enactment of his racial identity by making him more aware of how people of color would feel in specific circumstances and by helping him to acknowledge his white privilege in everyday
life. Taylor also mentioned that his racial identity makes him aware of his privilege, which could affect his enactment of his identity.

In sum, the personal-enacted gap was found to be experienced by people whose personal identity as a Roberts descendant conflicted with their enactment as Roberts descendants and by people whose personal racial heritage conflicted with the enactment of their racial identities. In this gap, it is apparent how closely personal and communal layers are, as belonging to the communal identity of Roberts descendants and to the communal identity of a specific racial group directly influence the personal layer of the participants’ identities, as well. These examples also show how the enacted layer is closely tied to relational layer, as people perform various identities in relation with other people.

**Relational Layer**

Analysis showed that the relational layer of the participants’ identities can be understood via the following quotes, or themes: “when I found out we family, we family” and “The difference between knowing and *knowing*” and “They vanished off the face of the earth.” These themes encompass the ways in which the participants communicate their identities relationally through family and contextually through relationships with people of varying races.

**“When I Find Out We Family, We Family”**

Many participants noted their unique position as Roberts descendants that allows them to have a broad understanding of family and kinship. Participants expressed their feelings of kinship and relational closeness to very distant relatives, who most people in the predominate United States context would not be close to. For instance, Jeremiah named eight generations of his family from memory during the interview, and he expressed the importance of each that he has known. May also knows relatives by name who are separated by centuries and by many
levels of familial separation. Yet, she felt that these relationships were important to understanding both her more immediate family and also herself.

Both Ali and William noted that people they know have a smaller context of family than they do. As Ali said, “when I find out we family, we family,” regardless of the amount of separation. Among Roberts descendants, separations are large in the varying family trees, making it difficult for many to name the exact relation between two people. However, this was frequently treated as inconsequential. Knowing and naming exact relations was not important to establishing and maintaining relational closeness. Nikki, as an example, described that she had met cousins at a homecoming who she is now close to and frequently stays with when she travels to their area, despite not knowing exactly how they are related.

In addition to not knowing exact relationships between descendants and feeling relational closeness, some participants mentioned feeling close to people or having relationships with people who they later discovered were Roberts descendants. Evette discovered that one of the friends she had growing up was her cousin, and that they were both descendants of Roberts Settlement. Ali and Miles mentioned that the AME church in Noblesville that they had attended was full of people who they did not know they were related to until much later in their lives. For some, a religious understanding of family helped shape their relational closeness. Many participants used the word “blessed” to describe their experience with family relations. Speaking of families that had left the settlement and never came back, Roselyn wished God’s blessing toward families who had left the settlement and never returned, hoping to one day be reunited with them. Jamaica and Crystal both spoke of the eternal nature of relationships in the Mormon faith, which causes them to regard relationships and specifically family very seriously—one reason being that they can, as Crystal said, “do baptisms for people who weren’t able to be
baptized and hear of the gospel here on earth,” and this is a work that they can do for their family members.

Many participants viewed family with high regard. Whether participants felt relationally close to other Roberts descendants or not, every participant mentioned that some family relation was a very important relationship in their lives.

**Geographic influence on closeness.** For many participants and Roberts descendants, central Indiana is or has been home. Atlanta, Indiana, where the settlement is, and the nearby cities of Noblesville, Indianapolis, and Kokomo were frequently mentioned as places in which participants to experience(d) relational closeness with their families and other Roberts descendants. Roberts Settlement, Atlanta, and the surrounding rural areas were frequently called “the country.” Important fixtures in these places included the Roberts Chapel, the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Noblesville, and a specific Noblesville neighborhood where, as Evette, Minuet, Miles, and Ramon, explained the majority of the people of color and poor White people lived in the town.

In many ways, the descendants who remained on the Settlement the longest and/or who moved to the Noblesville area carried on the relational and geographical closeness of the early Roberts settlers. When asked to describe their relationships with other Roberts descendants, many participants mentioned that growing up in central Indiana helped them form and maintain those relationships.

Ramon said, “I think it's been a close relationship, really, for the people in particular that were from there or came up there often.”

Jordan confirmed, saying, “My first cousins we’re more like brothers and sisters, and now that we’re older, and our kids are second cousins, and they’re more like first cousins. And I
think because of the way we grew up, meaning myself and my first cousins going back to Roberts Settlement every year...”

Still, others recalled growing up on the settlement and attending church at Roberts Chapel. They described their connection to the land and to others who lived on and worked the land in very positive and familial ways, as exemplified by Roselyn’s statement, “We had a connection with all of the descendants up there, and we saw each other every week. We helped out each other on the farming and what have you…and we still are close.”

For many descendants, living in the area contributed to their relational closeness with other Roberts descendants.

The Difference between Knowing and Knowing

In contrast, not all felt relational closeness to their extended families or to Roberts descendants. A few people mentioned that they were not close to many family members outside of their immediate family, or if they were close to extended family members it was not on the Roberts side.

William said, “There’s a difference between knowing people on a chart and how they relate to you and knowing that person, and I think that’s one of the things that Roberts Settlement as an organization does not do well.” This is a thought that was echoed by a few participants, who felt that while they knew they were Roberts descendants and maybe even knew of a few Roberts descendants, they did not feel close with other descendants. People mainly attributed this relational distance to geographical distance, the gradual effect of time on relationships, and the lack of information sharing from older family members.

Most of the people who indicated a lack of closeness or familiarity with other Roberts descendants were not geographically tethered to central Indiana in any way, many of them
having only recently discovered in their adulthood that they had connections to the settlement. Some expressed that it appeared that descendants who were closer to the settlement and members who attended annual homecomings seemed closer than those who did not. However, some older participants who consistently attend homecomings expressed that they have felt relationally distant from descendants at times, because many of their close relations have passed away, and they can feel disconnected from the younger generations. Minuet said, “I’m not as close now as I should be…cause I don’t know the young ones.” Daine, who took care of her father before he passed away, said that “he didn't know some of the younger family members because they were branched off to other families. A lot of the older ones that he did know had passed on.”

Another cause of not knowing other descendants or feeling relationally distant from them was the effect of family secrets or a lack of information about family members. As Ali said, “what’s with all these secrets around here anyway?”

Many participants expressed that they felt untethered from other Roberts descendants because they had never been given the chance to know about them and to grow close with them. They wondered why mothers, fathers, older cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents had failed to pass on information about the family or had passed on incorrect knowledge—what William called “tribal knowledge.” As some participants struggled to figure out where the information about Roberts Settlement had gotten lost in their family, they often wondered why. And for some, that answer can be found in the first ancestors who crossed the color line.

**They Vanished Off the Face of the Earth**

Several participants expressed that their relational identities with other descendants had been severed or hindered because of racial passing—either people in their family lines had
passed for white or they knew families who had passed for white. Racial passing disrupted relational potential and existing relationships in Roberts descendants’ lives, because like any form of major identity shift, it requires the embodiment of a new identity that can be threatened by people and relationships tied to the identity that is being changed.

Caitlin and Charles both expressed how the history of racial passing in their families was hidden by family members’ silence and secrets. This control of information eventually buried the racialized past of the family and thus hindered the relational potential.

Caitlin commented on this in her family, saying,

I have these cousins.  
They’re white.  
But their ancestors are black…  
   white…  
   black…  
   white….  
And they just wound up white.

In my own great grandmother’s siblings…  
she had a couple of sisters  
who were just…  
darker.

You ask my grandmother  
or my great uncle—my grandmother’s brother—  
on the coloring of their skin  
and you get this answer:

   “well, they were farmers…  
they were outside all the time….”

Bull crap.

Don’t try and play that one.

They try and bury that.
Ursula also believes that her grandmother’s family, all of her siblings but her, passed for white, which is why Ursula herself, never fully learned of the settlement or was close with the extended members of her family. Because her grandmother did not want to reveal the identity of her siblings, Ursula believes, she most likely could not talk about the settlement.

Other participants talked of the families that they knew who left the settlement suddenly, moved away, and were never heard from again, because they had passed the color line. Jordan spoke of his own mother who had passed for white, although she was multiracial, having Black, Native American, and white ancestry. Participants spoke of racial passing with regret, sadness, bitterness, and confusion, many noting that, while the motivations behind racial passing were understandable, it ultimately hurt relationships within the broader Roberts family.

As seen in this layer, the relational identity is closely tied to all other layers of the identity. Within the theme of “When I found out we family, we family” the communal frame is evident, as a way of establishing and maintaining a shared relational identity, while the theme “they vanished off the face of the earth” shows how the enacted (racial) identity is interconnected with the communal and the relational. With the interdependence of the frames in mind, the relational-personal identity gap is discussed next.

**Relational-Personal Identity Gap**

The relational-personal identity gap is one that occurs when an individual’s self-view and the identity others ascribe to them do not align in some way. It addresses “discrepancies between how an individual views him/herself and his/her perception of how others view him/her” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). For the participants, this gap emerged in two ways: discrimination and misinterpreting race.
Discrimination. Many participants recalled times in their lives when their race affected their life negatively when they were discriminated against because of their race. This relational conflict was expressed by the majority of Black participants. As Black participants’ self-regard clashed with others view of them—that they were lower status or less deserving of service, fair treatment, and the like—an identity gap emerged.

As Ali said, “Don’t think somebody ain’t thinking you’re Black. Cause as soon as you are, somebody’s gonna remind you that they’re thinking you’re Black.” In other words, an outsider’s, particularly a white person’s, idea of a racialized person can lead to negative results. An example of this was May’s story of working in a local library. She explained that in high school she had been working at the front desk, when a woman began attacking her with verbal insults, like “you people go back to the plantation” and “you don’t have a right to be here.” In tears, she realized that no adults present were willing to help her in the situation.

Daine also remembered instances of racial slurs and insults as a child playing intermural sports on a predominately Black team in Indianapolis. She said:

There were some racial slurs that were thrown at us….Our coaches would tell us on the bus, ‘Now before you get off, just let them call you whatever so we can just get through the game, and then get back on the bus, and get back to school.

Evette told the story of her senior high school trip, during which she and another Black girl were put into segregated accommodations:

I remember that when we got to DC, it was, our nation’s capital was the most segregated place we ever stopped. We went in a restaurant. They wouldn’t let us stay. Just me and her. And guess what, the whole class stayed except they put us out and they found someplace for us to eat. We went to a hotel and they wouldn’t let us stay, so they put us
in a Black Y. We wrote lies home. That was 1950 and there were just some classmates who didn’t want to be, you know, in a room with you. They had to go to school with you. But they didn’t have to associate with you beyond that.

Evette expressed that her white classmates were “clueless” about what they had been through. Evette’s self-view and her knowledge of herself and her experiences were unknown or uncared for by the majority of her white classmates, therefore causing tension. Additionally, both Evette and Minuet spoke of a place in Noblesville where many of their peers would go to during lunch or after school for food where they were not allowed to eat inside. Relationally, even years later at a high school reunion, their white peers were unable or unwilling to recognize the vast differences in their experiences at school.

Christopher and Kathryn, both from different states, spoke of their experiences in schools where Black students were treated unfairly compared to their white counterparts. Ursula spoke of her experience when her school desegregated via Brown vs. Board of Education. When relocated to a predominately white school, she felt less heard by her teachers and less comfortable with her peers. Still others spoke of discrimination in other contexts. Ali and Ramon told stories about their experiences being discriminated against by police officers and being surveilled in stores by employees. Kathryn spoke of working in human resources doing payroll at a major retail outlet, and being able to see the pay gaps between Black and white employees.

As Jung and Hecht (2004) said, it is not unusual for a person’s self-concept to differ from the ways others perceive them to be. This study shows how this may be particularly true for people of color, especially Black people, because stereotypes and biases against Black people influence the identity that others ascribe to Black individuals. Larry pointed out how others view him, saying, “I’m considered an underdog as far as what dominant culture sees me as.” Dealing
with discrimination because of this looks different from person to person. The participants in this study explained the following negotiation tactics.

**Negotiation.** When confronted with this identity gap in which other people misconstrue the racialized self as lesser, people negotiate this tension in many ways, which are highly dependent on the context and the power dynamics at play. Each of these stories and experiences were negotiated in different ways, often resolving in the heart of the participant after not being interpersonally resolved in the moment. The most common negotiation tactic was vigilance or awareness and a strong, positive self-regard.

Ali’s statement “Don’t think somebody ain’t thinking you’re Black” points to a negotiation tactic that was expressed by a few participants. Their way of dealing with this conflict was to be constantly aware that they might personally face discrimination at any point in their lives. Ramon expressed a similar view of “that’s just how things are so you have to watch out.”

Others, particularly when they were young, did not respond to this tension in the moment but were able to combat its effects by having a strong, positive self-regard. “You don’t get used to it. You just decide not to let it get to you….You know who you are,” Evette had said. Others like May noted a self-resolution that had happened over time. And while some experienced oppression because of their obvious racial identities, others have experienced difficulty because of their racial ambiguity.

**Misinterpreting race.** Another related way descendants expressed the personal-relational gap was when their self-regard of their racial identity was not aligned with what others viewed as their racial identity. Particularly for biracial participants and for the Black participants
with light skin, this often happened and happens when people misinterpret their race based on their skin color.

Miles named this a state of being an “ethnic chameleon.” Though he feels he does not look African American because of his light skin, he was accepted as and treated as African American in the community he grew up in. But as he got older and moved away from that community, he found that he was also accepted into white culture and white spaces. “If they had known I was African American, they would have acted differently,” he said. He exemplified this by telling a story about going to a college party where he found that his white peers made racial slurs, unaware of his presence as a biracial person.

Jordan too, spoke of this kind of exchange, noting that when he was in the military, the white people he worked with would make racial slurs around him until they discovered he was biracial, and then they stopped talking to him as if he were white. Taylor spoke similarly about his and his father’s experiences, saying that their racial ambiguity allowed white people to treat them like they are white and Black people to treat them like they are Black.

Others who are Black and have light skin spoke of their experiences: “People ask me what race I am. I said I’m Black can’t you tell?” Kathryn said.

Ursula and Marley spoke of their experiences as Black women with light skin, noting that they are sometimes identified by others as white. When each of them left their hometowns for college, they were suddenly confronted with the fact that many people did not read them as Black women.

Ursula said, “When I went off to college that was the first time…people started questioning, “What are you? Are you Puerto Rican?” I never had heard that before. I never thought anyone would question that.”
When Marley went to college, she said:

I lived on the other side of the railroad tracks in Noblesville
so that’s where most of us…
    we were mixed in with other poor white families
    but that’s where we lived,
    On the other side of the railroad tracks literally.

Then I moved to college.

I had never really thought about
what I looked like,
and when I had to try and find myself
to identify myself
in strange sorts of ways as African American
—because I didn’t look necessarily
African American—
but getting myself established
with that identity was very challenging for me.

I had never thought of it
before I went at all.

This quote reveals the challenges that Marley had between her personal racial identity and her relational racial identity, as she struggled to be ascribed the correct identity by others. Like the early Roberts settlers whose identities as free people of color led them to occupy a space between racial categories, so too many descendants, whether they self-identify as multiracial or not, are perceived as racially ambiguous or ascribed a race with which they do not identify. Because of this, as seen above, many have faced and/or still face challenges within all levels of their identity, including the interpersonal dilemma of failing to be ascribed the same racial identity as they identify personally.

**Negotiation.** Three ways participants expressed negotiating this misinterpretation of race were accepting others’ views, immersion in community, and changing physical appearance. Miles, for instance, encompassed the first of these strategies when he accepted others’ views of
his race to watch the situation play out or to better understand the people he was with. He also used the tactic of community immersion, as he uses his race to “walk in both worlds.” Others tended to choose one tactic or the other. Taylor and Miles, for instance, chose to let others feel correct in their assumptions about their race without correcting them. Others negotiated this gap by becoming immersed in their racial community, so to further prevent misinterpretation from happening again. Marley and Ursula exemplify this when they purposefully sought out Black communities near them so that they could feel comfortable and be identified with the Black community.

Lastly, some participants changed their appearance to further prevent misidentification. For example, Ursula explained that she “went to the other extreme” to prove her Blackness by trying to style her hair in an afro and then for a few decades in dreads. Enacting a more traditionally Black hairstyle allowed her to more fully express her racial identity in a way that would be recognized by more people. Jordan also explained that when we was young, he would stay out in the sun and attempt to get as dark as possible so that he could appear Black around his father’s family members who are Black. But when he was with his mother in the winter, he would do the opposite and try to stay as light as possible.

Through these three strategies, we see how participants who experienced the personal-relational gap in the way of misinterpreting race navigate(d) their positionality as racially ambiguous people. For many, this is a lifelong process that involves negotiation within all layers of their identity. Having discussed the relational-personal identity gap, next the relational-enacted gap will be covered.

**Relational-Enacted Identity Gap**
The relational-enacted gap occurs when there is a discrepancy between a person’s relational identity—the identity ascribed by others, created in relationship with others, relational units of identity, or multiple identities in relation to each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004)—and the enactment or performance of their identity. One way that participants experienced the relational-enacted gap was in their relational identity created with other Roberts descendants. As discussed previously in the relational layer, some participants felt relationally close to other Roberts descendants, while others did not. A few people from both of these groups expressed that they did not adequately enact their relationships with other Roberts descendants.

This feeling was revealed through statements about what they “should” be doing versus what they were actually enacting in their everyday lives. Both William and Minuet said, “I’m not as close as I should be,” when describing their relationships with other descendants. Miles said “I’m really detached from most people [descendants], though I am one [a descendant].” Kathryn also expressed that she was not as relationally close to other descendants, like she felt the ancestors would have wanted her to be.

**Negotiation.** To navigate this gap, many expressed that staying connected closely with a few descendants was a common way of negotiating this tension. May, Miles, William, and Kathryn all disclosed a few Roberts descendants who they did feel close to and maintained relationships with through phone calls, emails, social media, and visits, even when they felt they did not do this with many descendants. Additionally, they navigated this gap through similar means of enactment that will be discussed in the next frame. That is, descendants, even when they feel they are not properly enacting their identities as Roberts descendants, still manage to enact their identity in some ways. These are explored next in the enacted layer.
Enacted Layer

Roberts descendants expressed and enacted their identities in many ways. When coded, the themes that emerged were (1) genealogy and research (2) participation in Roberts Settlement and (3) participation in racial communities. These themes encompassed the ways the participants expressed themselves as members of the larger Roberts ancestry and the ways they enacted their racial identities.

Genealogy and Research

Many participants spoke about the labor involved in doing genealogy research to find family members and to stay connected. Participants recognized that the genealogy work does not happen on its own, so they or someone they know must go through the sometimes tedious process of intentionally seeking out information about family history. The most common resources mentioned were other family members, Vincent’s (1999) book, Conkling’s (1957) dissertation, Ancestry.com, and the feature of Roberts Settlement in Ebony Magazine (1951).

The participants who were heavily involved in genealogy and research served as resources for not only their immediate family but also larger, extended networks, as people would use them as sources of information, and they would collaborate to fill in missing pieces of the family history.

May, who several participants mentioned as a resource for the genealogy of Roberts Settlement said this,

If you lose the genealogy, you lose the history.

It’s just another picnic.

Why are we here?
We have to know why we’re here.

What’s your relationship
to the people behind in the cemetery?
Why do we need to keep the cemetery up?

If we lose the genealogy,
we lose the history.

Other expressed similar sentiments about the importance of genealogy in keeping descendants connected. Some participants, such as Christopher, Caitlin, Ursula, and Charles discovered their connection to Roberts Settlement through genealogy work. Their active searching about their family history led them to the greater community and story of the settlement. Others who did not participate in genealogy work expressed gratitude for the people who had done it in the past and were still doing it, because their genealogy records provide knowledge that might otherwise be lost or be difficult to compile. A few participants expressed the need for more descendants to do genealogy work because of the difficulty and ethical concerns of researching family lines that are farther away from their own. As Marley indicated, one person and one family cannot do the genealogy of all Roberts descendants. And it takes a special person with “a lot of expertise, a lot of inner strength, a lot of stamina, a lot of go-to attitude” to perform that labor for the larger family. Caitlin, too, mentioned that it was difficult to find the information, because people in her family line had not done the work or recorded their genealogy. She expressed her frustration in looking for lines that had gone cold, for people who she could not identify, answers that she said she may never have until she dies.

In sum, the majority of participants felt that actively seeking out information and learning about their family histories was important. Even if they did not consider themselves the genealogy person of their family, most indicated that they actively sought out information via
other people or through resources like *Southern Seed, Northern Soil* (Vincent, 1999). In addition to more private or dyadic ways of learning about the settlement, people engage in communal ways of participation described below.

**Participation in Roberts Settlement**

The second way that many descendants communicate their identities through action is by active participation in the Roberts Settlement community. This included being on the board and/or committees, taking part in special projects concerning Roberts Settlement, attending homecomings, and telling others about their heritage.

**Board and committee membership.** Seven participants indicated that they had been on or were currently on the board of Roberts Settlement Church, Burial and Homecoming Association. Participants expressed varying feelings about being on this leadership team, from pride in the things they had accomplished to frustration about disagreements concerning the direction of the organization. All of the board members spoke of the importance of active preservation of the settlement and its history, noting the board’s role in facilitating that by consulting and updating the Roberts Settlement Bylaws and Constitution, staying in contact with descendants and members through email, Facebook, and the Roberts Settlement website, and procuring the necessary funds to pay for the settlement’s upkeep, among other things. Many spoke of this work as a duty, something that their ancestors would have wanted them to do.

*Jeremiah said this about being on the board:*

I think as a board member, you're more concerned about keeping up things, keeping up the building of the church, keeping up the property. When you're not on the board, you don't worry about it…or you're not involved in it. Now, as a board member, you worry about if something happens or needing to do this or that or the other.
The things board members worry about, or attend to, includes those that are dealt with by committees. According to the organization’s bylaws (2001a) the committees include the Program Committee, Committee on Memorials, Committee on Grounds, and Finance Committee. These groups take care of programming at homecomings, keep track of deceased members, uphold the rules of the settlement’s remaining land and handle any work on it, and collect money and finances at meetings, respectively. Board members also spoke of getting appraisals for the cemetery and being involved with laying out the places in which descendants may be buried in the future, and preserving the settlement’s land from outside forces, such as the widening of 276th street.

However, even in participating in the board and its good work, some spoke of the tension that has occurred within the board, noting that things like family representation on the board and participating in outside projects concerning Roberts Settlement have caused relational and organization conflict at times. But even with these setbacks, each person noted that the preservation of Roberts Settlement through the board is an important fixture in the history of the settlement.

**Special projects.** Several participants mentioned that they or other descendants take part in outside projects about Roberts Settlement to communicate the settlement’s identity to broader audiences. This included a play written in 2016 by Celeste Williams, an Indianapolis writer. The play *More Light: Douglass Returns* was about Frederick Douglass’ return to Indiana in 1880 after being nearly killed by a mob in Pendleton, Indiana in 1843. The play involved key figures from Roberts Settlement, and some descendants helped organize this production.
Other projects included a short documentary about Roberts Settlement produced by Clover Lane Media and accompanying community conversations during which descendants went to local libraries and gatherings to share the history of Roberts Settlement with nearby Hoosiers.

**Homecomings.** Many more participants, though not a part of the formal organizational structure of Roberts Settlement spoke of attending the annual homecomings at the settlement. Participants’ views about the homecomings ranged from intimacy and familiarity to casual interest. They came to reconnect with family members, to uphold tradition, or to meet people for the first time and begin new traditions for their family.

Some, especially those who have attended homecomings their entire lives and those who lived on the settlement or nearby, described feeling extremely connected and excited at homecomings. They recalled how homecomings felt very special as children, because relatives would come from far away states to the rural, Indiana land. Similar to the findings about racial identity, many described an evolution of feelings toward the homecomings over time. As children, many went because their parents took them. Participants said they played with their cousins or followed their parents around, but they grew into greater appreciation of the homecomings as they got older.

Marley said:
I feel exhilarated when I go now—that all the families that represent the past that are there, just on top of the world feeling.” But said that earlier in life, it did not feel that way. Jeremiah echoed these feelings saying, “I think the older you get, the more you start to appreciate your heritage and your family history. When you’re young, you don’t really appreciate it that much and don’t really understand the relevance of it that much.
For others, the homecomings represented a more casual interest. Some spoke about having gone to homecomings but not feeling very connected, because they didn’t know many of the people there. As Ali said, it felt like somebody else’s family reunion. Since he wasn’t relationally as close to the people that attended, the enactment of going to the reunion did not mean as much to him as it did to the people who had been going their whole lives. Miles explained similar thoughts, saying,

for me it’s [attending homecomings] more a historical interest. It’s fascinating. It’s always a good experience. I also come out of there feeling good about my ancestry. It’s less of a social experience for me and more of an educational experience.

Still others who had not attended expressed a desire to go in search of deeper meaning. Caitlin said that she wanted to attend and see if it had a “wow factor,” to see if it felt like she was going home, like she belonged.

All participants said that the homecomings were or seemed like important aspects of descendants’ identities, something that separated Roberts descendants from other early African American and multiracial settlements whose activity eventually dwindled or ceased. As William said,

I come because I connect to this history.
I come because I realize it’s important.
I come because we all have something deeper
that connects us
and we’re trying to
consciously or subconsciously
figure out why we’re here.

So let’s do that.

Homecomings, as Vincent (1999) and Conkling (1957) noted, remain an integral part of preserving and celebrating common heritage for descendants. In this study, homecomings were
found as a main avenue of expression or performance of self, relational, and communal identity of being a Roberts descendant. Even those who had never been to a homecoming still found ways to express their identities as descendants. One way was through telling others.

**Telling others.** Even participants who have never been on the board, had never attended homecomings, and expressed some disconnect from the larger settlement, said that they talk about Roberts Settlement with other people. For many people, the act of telling others about their heritage felt like a duty to continue the legacy, especially within their families.

Jeremiah noted that in the past, descendants had not wanted to advertise the settlement, perhaps in fear of repercussions as people of color living in rural Indiana. However, the sentiment that participants expressed today was, the more people who knew about the settlement, the better, and they would take part in disseminating that information to their families and others.

For many descendants, interpersonal conversations about their heritage was a way of enacting their identities as descendants, as it served as a small way of distributing knowledge about the settlement and its history. In addition to enacting their identities as descendants, people also expressed how they enacted their racial identities.

**Participation in Racial Communities**

The final way in which the participants enacted their identities was to participate in Black and multiracial communities, and this was something most participants expressed a commitment to. There was no predominate way of this participation, as each person who expressed their participation seemed to find a different avenue to do so. These groups ranged from student groups to careers that enable them to give opportunities to people of color. Larry said,

As a Black man I need to do my part to make things better for my people. I know that we have a history of being discriminated against. I can’t unite the whole African American
race, but I can do my part. I can educate. I mentor the young and ex-offenders. I’m a member of a group that deals with recovering alcoholics and addicts…Any issue that’s dealing with my race, I’m interested in.”

In the same spirit of commitment, Jamaica expressed how she, as a Black woman in the military, was told she “probably would not be hired into certain positions” because of her natural hair. She then worked with others to have the hair regulations changed to reflect more inclusive language concerning Black hair. This was a way of expressing her commitment to other Black people in the military. A few participants also spoke of city committees they were on that look out for the welfare of Black people in their communities. Descendants enact their racial identities by not only participating in recreational activities and groups with other Black people but also by showing a commitment to people of color by advocating for them in different arenas and providing social support.

Again, within the enacted frame, we see how enactment is closely tied to communal, relational, and personal identity, as the expression of identity is caused by and causes other layers of the identity, like in the above examples where the expression of participating as a descendant or a member of a racial group is caused by a communal identity and simultaneously causes a greater sense of group identification to emerge. However, enacted and communal identity can be at odds, as described in the enacted-communal gap that follows.

**Enacted-Communal Identity Gap**

The enacted-communal identity gap occurs when a person’s expressed identity conflicts in some way with their identity of group membership. From analysis, this gap was not very apparent. Though, it may explain the few participants who enacted their identities as descendants by attending homecomings who did not feel connected on a communal level with the rest of the
descendants. Evette and Ali both expressed that the enactment of going to a homecoming did not make them feel communally tied to the larger group of descendants, since they had not known about the settlement until late in their lives. Additionally, one participant who engaged in genealogy work to better connect with her extended family did express feeling disconnected from the Roberts community, because the Walden line of the Roberts community is not strong within the descendants. For one, this can be seen in the very name “Roberts Settlement”—and the resulting “Roberts descendants”—even though Micajah Walden was one of the first of 3 people to buy land. On a more interpersonal level, people only tied to the Walden line may not feel as communally connected to other descendants of the settlement, if this participant’s experiences are common among others with the same family history.

**Negotiation.** Analysis revealed that those experiencing this gap negotiated this gap by accepting the dissonance it created in their identities. The majority of participants who felt a discrepancy between their enacted and communal identities did not have a resolution or way to mitigate that tension; rather they accepted the tension as something that was a natural byproduct of their unique situations.

Having discussed the enacted layer and the identity gaps associated with it, the last layer to discuss is the communal layer.

**Communal Layer**

The communal layer of identity is created within larger groups of people or organizations, such as an ethnic and/or religious identity (Faulkner & Hecht, 2011). When analyzing how Roberts descendants’ identities were shaped by communities, two main communities emerged: The Black community and Roberts Settlement.
**Black Community**

This theme encompassed how descendants spoke of belonging to their racial groups and specifically to broader Black and African American communities. Many expressed that belonging to the Black racial and ethnic community gave them a sense of strength and pride that contributed positively to their self-regard. Two sub-themes emerged in this analysis, quotes from Kathryn and May respectively: “I’m proud to be Black; it’s just the struggle” and “We always overcome.”

“**I’m proud to be Black; it’s just the struggle.**” For many, belonging to the Black community was expressed as an intrinsic quality about themselves, as was experiencing struggle because of their race. Many expressed that one did not exist without the other. To be Black meant to struggle in America. As Ali said:

By the time you’ve realized you’re Black, you’ve already heard the stories of what your parents have gone through and your grandparents have gone through, what you should do and shouldn’t do….You get your Blackness from your parents, and they’re instilling it in you.

For Ali, the realization of Blackness comes after learning about the struggle of being Black. The struggle was emphasized both as a past and present condition. And the two conditions were not seen as separate. The past conditions were recognized as causal factors in the present struggle, as participants told not only their own stories of struggle but also their parents’ and their grandparents’ and their great-grandparents’.

“My dad’s dad was a slave,” Evette said. “Where does that leave me when it comes to history?” Others, such as Larry, Ursula, Jeremiah, and Daine spoke of their experiences with segregation. For some who grew up in central Indiana, common experiences were shared, such
as not being able to eat inside of a particular diner in Noblesville, shared by Evette and Minuet. In the same vein, Ramon described not being able to swim in the local pool, because “there were only certain days that they would allow Blacks to go.” Speaking to this same issue, Marley said that her father was part of the coalition that “went before the parks board and part of the city council to try and get us access to go into the swimming pool.”

The communal struggles were not all tied to past legal segregation but were also spoken of presently, from gentrification and lack of affordable housing to unequal access to education and police brutality. Many participants noted that “especially today” or “in today’s time” or “in today’s day and age” the history of Roberts Settlement is necessary, because it shows the positive accomplishments of Black people in America. Many participants identified with the Black racial community and saw their lived experiences connecting with the experiences of Black people across temporal and geographic boundaries.

“We always overcome.” Even as they discussed the hardships of being Black in America, participants expressed their pride about the strength of Black people and their ability to overcome. Many connected with this sense of triumph in their own lives.

Crystal and May said, respectively:

“We persevere regardless of what’s put in front of us. We’re a strong people” and “We’re an oppressed people that have raised up. We must be a strong race, to be subjected to what happened throughout our history, sometimes things that are still happening. And we’re still here contributing to society…It’s been a tough journey, but we’ve made it.”

Many participants found significance in belonging to a racial group whose people had endured so much but who had and continue to overcome. When speaking about their racial
groups, participants used first person plural pronouns, as seen above. Their use of “we” and “us” reflect their feelings of connection to the connection to the larger community of Black people.

The idea of strength and endurance being passed down to the participants was repeated frequently. “They survived that, so that gives you power,” May said. This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that they were headstrong or successful or tenacious because they belonged to the Black community.

Roberts Settlement

In addition to Roberts descendants’ identities being shaped by various racial communities, they are also shaped by the community of Roberts descendants and their feelings of belonging to this multi-generational kinship group. People saw themselves as a part of the past, present, and future of the settlement.

Past. When speaking about Roberts Settlement, as many did when speaking of the Black community, participants often spoke with first person plural pronouns, as they told the story of Roberts and their kin making the original journey north and west from North Carolina and Virginia. For many this journey was emblematic not only of their ancestral journey but also of their personal journeys, as the story of how they themselves came to be spanned centuries. For example, May said, “Knowing my history of Roberts Settlement it has empowered me today.” And Miles said, “It’s nice to know where I come from.” Participants expressed awareness and thankfulness for their ancestors who directly affected their own lives with their choices.

Participants also noted the significance of the settlement and their feelings about belonging to a unique history, noting that the history is different from traditional tellings of Indiana history and of Black history in general. Miles, Ali, Ursula, May, and William spoke on the importance of including their history, Roberts Settlement history, in classrooms, especially in
Indiana. A few participants questioned why they had not learned about Roberts Settlement in their history classes, saying that their understanding of Black history in school was only of slavery and the Civil Rights era, nothing that spoke of successful people of color before 1965. “The whole world needs to know that there are people that helped settle this country other than those that have been promoted and written about in history books,” Marley said. To many, Roberts Settlement was a source of pride, because belonging to it meant belonging to a unique group of people who were successful in the past despite their circumstances.

**Present.** In addition to feeling connected to the Roberts of the past, many descendants felt connected to the large network of Roberts descendants that exist today, in a symbolic way. As discussed in the relational frame of identity under “The difference between knowing and knowing,” some participants expressed that they did not feel relationally close with many Roberts descendants past their immediate family, first cousins, and possibly second cousins. However, many participants expressed a symbolic connection with descendants, who they appreciated and felt connected to, even if they did not know them. For example, Ali, Crystal, Jamaica, Caitlin, and Christopher felt relationally distant from most Roberts descendants, having only recently learned of their connection; however, they still felt as if they were a part of the larger network of extended families in a symbolic way.

**Future.** Lastly, many descendants felt that they were a part of the settlement’s future. Participants often spoke of the younger people in their families who they hope will continue carrying on the legacy of Roberts Settlement. This ranged from encouraging young people be involved in activities concerning Roberts Settlement to passing on stories to them in the hopes that they would carry on the stories. For example, Kathryn noted that she did the same thing with her children and nieces and nephews that her uncles and father did for her—walk the grounds of
the settlement and tell them about their history. “They kept it going, and that’s our job to keep it going,” Kathryn said. In telling young people the stories they knew from the past in addition to their own stories, participants are effectively writing themselves into the future history of the settlement. Others spoke of their wish to be buried in the Roberts cemetery and be laid to rest next to grandparents, great-grandparents, and the chapel that served as the center of the settlement’s community. Several participants mentioned their hopes for the settlement to eventually have a museum, which would showcase the history of the family and their various contributions to communities over time.

However, others, while they felt as if they identified with the community, had trouble imagining its future. Many mentioned the fate of nearby Beech Settlement, where reunions have dwindled over the years, while others wondered how to encourage young people to be involved and how the community would deal with the older generations passing away. Still the majority of participants expressed hope that the legacy of the settlement would continue, if only they and other descendants did not let it die. “It’s been engrained in all of us,” Minuet said. “I think it will always exist. I believe that.”

**Communal-Relational Identity Gap**

While the communal identity was expressed positively in many ways through belonging to both Roberts Settlement and racial communities, the communal layer like all layers affords complications to arise, in this case through the communal-relational gap. The communal-relational gap was most often expressed as a feeling of symbolic communal identity with Roberts Settlement and yet a lack of tangible relational ties within Roberts descendants. Some participants expressed guilt about how they were not as close as they “should” be to other
descendants, even as they acknowledged that the relational distance was most likely a natural byproduct of the settlement’s diaspora.

A frequent observation was the perceived distance in relational closeness between older and younger generations. Older participants noted that many of their close relational ties had passed away—that homecomings looked and felt different to them, because they no longer knew as many people. Younger participants also worried about the distance that many perceived was the natural result of generational differences. “The older folks…have an appreciation for the history, because they lived it…There’s definitely a divide in the younger folks who kind of inherited the success but not the struggle,” Miles said. Roselyn noted that the generational passing was inevitable and that her generation is now tasked with doing what the older generations had done before—teaching the younger generations how to continue the legacy and uphold familial relationships.

This gap was also attributed to Roberts Settlement as an organization. Participants noted that homecomings and other efforts on behalf of the organization could be doing more to connect descendants.

William said:

That’s one of the things that Roberts Settlement as an organization does not do well. I feel there are a lot people, particularly the younger generations, who are probably asking themselves the same question I asked myself about why I am here, because they kind of only know those immediate cousins that they hang with all the time when they’re there…so that’s something I’d like to see our organization do more to try to bring the younger generations, including my generation, cause we’re getting to be the older generation, to bring us closer together.
Other participants noted that the organization could do small things like include name tags or t-shirts so that people could better understand their relationships to people at homecomings.

**Negotiation.** People negotiated the communal-enacted gap in two ways: genealogy research and technology. Participants expressed how they attempted to find common ground with other descendants through their genealogy research. Those who identified themselves as the genealogy researchers of their families often indicated that their search for family information connected them with genealogy researchers in other families and to extended family members who did not identify as genealogy researchers but who perhaps held information about their families. Several participants who did not identify as genealogy researchers also said that other peoples’ genealogy research helped build relational connections.

May said, “The distance, the generational distance between cousins now has kind of grown apart, that it’s not as close as it once was, but I’ve noticed that the genealogy portion is drawing me closer to people I really didn’t know….It’s a work in progress.”

May called genealogy a “door to open,” and many others expressed that genealogy research was something that helped them become relationally, not just symbolically, connected with other descendants. Additionally, technology was used to negotiate the communal-enacted gap. Social media, in particular, was identified as a way to help build relational bonds between descendants. The Roberts Settlement Facebook page and personal pages were identified as a tools to help descendants keep in touch, even across generations. William noted that while his cousin might live across the country, he knows his cousin’s kids well because of phones and social media.
Communal-Personal Identity Gap

The final gap analyzed was the communal-personal gap that occurs when a self-identity and communal identity are in conflict. The gap occurred between personal and communal knowledge. The gap between personal and communal knowledge was one expressed by many participants, who felt that they had inadequate knowledge about their ancestry and about Roberts Settlement. While belonging to a community of descendants, many felt that they did not know enough about the history of the community.

Participants spoke of not knowing about their history until later in life or about thinking they knew about their history, but later realizing that there was much more to learn.

“And it’s hard enough to know your family,” Ali had said, speaking of family relations extending from common grandparents. He went on to say that learning about the connections in Roberts Settlement was even more difficult.

Likewise, Crystal, Caitlin, and Jamaica spoke about not knowing much about their connections to the settlement and feeling like they lacked the knowledge to know how they fit into the larger picture. When asked if being a Roberts descendant was a significant part of her identity, Crystal said, “I don’t know yet. I want to find out more.” Here Crystal was expressing that more knowledge about Roberts Settlement would help her determine its level of significance in her personal identity.

Negotiation. The main way people attempted to negotiate this identity gap was to acquire knowledge or be in proximity to knowledge that would make them feel more connected to the larger community and its history. Many participants did this by connecting with people who did know about the family history. During the interviews, most participants identified at least one person in their family—a sister, a father, a grandfather—who knew more information than they
did. And they used that person as a proxy for communal knowledge. For example, William, Charles, Minuet, Jeremiah, Nikki, and Marley identified May as a source of information for them about the family’s genealogy and history. As a person engaged in genealogy and who has put much labor into collecting information about the family lines of the settlement, many people see her as a resource. Likewise, Crystal identified Jamaica as a source of information on family history. In seeking out information from people who are identified as sources of knowledge, descendants are able to mitigate the tension between their personal and communal knowledge.

In sum, the communal identity, especially as it pertains to racial and family identity, plays a large role in descendants’ lives. In conjunction with the personal, enacted, and relational frame, the communal frame and its explanations of group belonging is a source of both pride, struggle, joy, and belonging for many descendants. Ultimately, it is the communal identity of Roberts descendancy that connects this group of people who, as we have seen explored in other frames, differ in many other ways. As the settlement moved from being an active place where hundreds of people lived, its communal identity has evolved over the centuries, and now, the communal identity of descendants is a unique—at once local and geographically diverse—identity that relies upon a shared understanding of family history. This family history has largely been shaped by realities of race in the US, which will be discussed next to answer the second and final research question.

**Race in the US Context**

Evident in past research by Vincent (1999) and Conkling (1957), Roberts Settlement’s identity during its time as a flourishing settlement, as well as its identity in retrospect, are unique because of its residents’ racial identities. With more freedom than most free Blacks and less than white people, this connection of family and kin formed a communal identity that was a direct
byproduct of racial systems in the US. Viewing the Roberts’ communal identity simultaneously with the other frames of CTI, it is clear how their enacted, relational, and personal identities were also largely influenced by the ethnohistorical realities of the time.

This is to say that present Roberts descendants’ identities have similarly been influenced by race in the US context, even as that context has changed over the last few centuries. Though the descendants’ identities are less racially unified than the early Roberts settlers, all of their lives have been shaped by race. So, the final research question—How has race in the US context shaped Roberts descendants’ identities?—is answered through the two themes, race and the law, and lived experience.

**Race and the law**

The US is far from being post-racial, if only for the fact that racist laws that were repealed within the lifetimes of those still living have had and continue to have material effect on people’s lives. While the obviously racist laws, such as anti-miscegenation laws no longer exist, there are still failures (or perhaps successes) on a systemic level that continue operate within “dimensions of power and exclusion” (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1312). Within these dimensions are mechanics of surveillance and tracking, such as birth certificates and the census, which have also shaped people’s lives, as explored below.

**Anti-miscegenation laws.** To begin, only a few participants explicitly stated that anti-miscegenation laws had influenced their lives in some way. Indiana’s anti-miscegenation laws lasted until 1965, almost seven decades longer than most northern states (Schoff, 2009), and this affected a few participants and/or their families in tangible ways. For example, Safia’s parents had to leave Indiana and move to Ohio to get married, where she and her siblings spent most of their childhood. Lory’s brother also had to get married out of the state, and Jordan’s parents,
though they did not live in Indiana, had to move from the South to get married in Chicago, Illinois. In these three examples, anti-miscegenation laws directly affected descendants’ lives, especially their geographic movement and, thus, their interpersonal, and more specifically, familial relationships. However, it is worth positing that anti-miscegenation laws and their reflection of predominate cultural views of racially mixed marriages, served as driving forces for who people did marry, as well as where people have migrated in the decades following *Loving V Virginia* (Gevrek, 2014).

**Legal records.** Marriage in the US has been a racialized institution since its inception (Gevrek, 2014), but even before marriage, the government’s attempts to record its citizenry can influence the lives of even newborns, through birth certificates and census records. The Roberts and their kin had their racial labels changed over time, and some of their descendants still experience difficulty with official documentation about their race. Jordan, who said his parents couldn’t get married in the state said it was because, “My father is African American and my mother even though she is African American, it says white on her birth certificate.” Because his mother was multiracial but appeared white, her birth certificate declared her white. For Jordan, who described his struggle throughout life identifying as a multiracial person, the differences between legal and self-identification in his family caused an even greater sense of confusion. Taylor, as mentioned previously in the results, recognizes that legally he is biracial, although he self-identifies as white. Cases like these exemplify how US systems of legally and permanently categorizing people racially can cause internal and external conflict.

Additionally, the US census plays a role in shaping descendants’ lives. Jamaica described looking up her family’s genealogy and discovering, “there was a time when the Census was C for colored, and then it changed to C for Chinese, and the year that that happened, my family was
listed as Chinese….I have to go look in Chinese records instead of B for Black records.” Perhaps this seems like an inconsequential example, but it is indicative of larger problems within the US’s systems of tracking people’s racial identities, namely that the census changes to reflect the current, predominate perspectives of race, which demonstrates that the government and institutions influenced by the government have power in deciding what racial identities are valid or not valid at any given time (Haney-López, 2006; Rodriguez, 2000). In this study, this was most seen in the biracial participants, whose identities are difficult to contend with in the US, where monoracial categories were and still are more prevalent than multiracial ones, as indicated by the census, which did not allow for people to check more than one box on the census until 2000 (Nadal et al., 2013). Because the census both reflects and creates racial categories, we can see how the census’ historical bias toward monoracial people and bias against people of African descent has helped sustain social beliefs and institutional policies that make it difficult for people, like the multiracial Roberts descendant, to negotiate their identities.

**Legal racial discrimination.** The racial hierarchy in the US not only affected marriage laws and legal records, but it was also the key factor in Roberts Settlement’s development. In a system that valued whiteness above all races, that was built on acts of racial exclusion and inclusion (Prewitt, 2013), legalized discrimination in every way imaginable affected the early Roberts’ lives and many present descendants’ lives, as well. From the description of discrimination discussed in the relational-personal identity gap, we can see how the systems of inclusion and exclusion still exist today and how they affect descendants on a tangible and personal level. In addition, the previously discussed relational severance and strain that racial passing had on the family can be attributed to legal discrimination, because the search for better opportunity with a white identity, led people, like Charles’ great uncle and other members of his
family, to move and never return.

Legal discrimination in the form of segregation and housing discrimination has also affected descendants’ lives. Many participants, by the constraints of the law, whether imposed in their lifetime or a byproduct of them, live(d) in specific, racialized neighborhoods, where people of color live(d), such as the commonly mentioned neighborhood in Noblesville. As a result, the racial demographics of descendants’ childhood neighborhoods, as discussed by Miles, Jordan, Ramon, Jamaica, and Safia, to name a few, played large roles in shaping their sense of self, as well as their communal identities.

In summary, though legalized racial discrimination has been illegal for decades, the effects of those laws are still apparent in descendants’ lives, including their geographic locations, economic opportunity, and relational lives.

Lived Experience

As mentioned above, race in the US context has shaped descendants’ lives in tangible ways. The lived experience of being a racialized person in the US or descending from racialized people in the US is, as seen in the results regarding the four frames of CTI, something that spans each layer of a person’s identity.

In general, belonging to descendants of a racialized settlement that flourished despite the racial systems at the time, makes descendants aware of their own racial identities and the racial systems at work presently. This looks different for each participant. For Charles, it means recognizing his white privilege, as he says, “I do believe that my white skin gives me a lot of privileges and that I need to be cognizant of that and recognize that.” For Jamaica it means living up to that legacy as a Black woman. She said, “I want to make sure that I’m living up to what I think they would have wanted me to do, which is get my education, have a strong family, and
have a strong faith.” For Safia, it means sharing stories of successful people of color, like the Roberts and others in the present, because “we need these types of stories to counteract what the prevailing views are.” For Nikki, it means representing her identity well, as she says, “I feel a sense of responsibility to represent my identity and to carry on for the history and the ancestry that I’ve been taught.”

Participants had personalized responses, but their responses indicated a sense of awareness of their own racial positionality in relation to the settlement and to the broader US population. Their lived experience as people descended from a racialized settlement affected their identities on various levels, causing them to be aware of racial dimensions in everyday life, proud of their heritage, and avid proponents of their own success and others’ success in living up to their potential. This demonstrates how racialized identities, though products of oppression, are often reclaimed in ways that give people a sense of pride, belonging, and community.

Though the lived experience of being a racialized person or being descended from racialized people can be negative in some regards and though systems of race in the US have negatively affected most participants’ lives, many descendants still find pride in their identities as Roberts descendants. This is evident in the results from both research questions, as participants described the many ways their identities as Roberts descendants contributed positively to their self-regard, their relationships, and their communities.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 4 covered the results of this study by providing an overview of the participants as well as the themes and subthemes of the study. The chapter then discussed the themes found in the analysis, as they describe how participants’ identities relate to the personal, relational, enacted, and communal frames of CTI, how participants experience and negotiate identity gaps,
and how race in the US context has shaped descendants’ identities. In the next chapter, these results are discussed.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The final chapter reviews the research questions and purpose of this study. It then discusses the results of the research and directions for future research. After discussing the study’s limitations, the chapter ends with a section on reflexivity and a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of CTI and CRT, this study examined the identities of descendants of one of the largest early settlements of free people of color in the US. To better understand who Roberts descendants are and how they communicate their identities, the following research questions were raised: RQ1A: How do Roberts descendants negotiate their sense of self? RQ1B: How do Roberts descendants co-communicate their identities relationally? RQ1C: How do Roberts descendants express their identities? RQ1D: How do communities help shape Roberts descendants’ identities? RQ1E: How do Roberts descendants negotiate identity gaps, should they experience identity gaps? RQ2: How has race in the US context shaped Roberts descendants’ identities?

After thematically coding in-depth interview data, the results showed the diverse ways by which communication and identity mutually constitute the lives of Roberts descendants. In addition, results showed how race in the US context has shaped their identities. The results will be discussed in the following sections: communication theory of identity, critical race theory, findings about race, findings about family, findings about Roberts Settlement’s history, and unexpected findings. Directions for future research are discussed throughout these sections.

Communication Theory of Identity

To begin, the findings of this study support CTI’s proposition that identity and communication mutually influence one another and that identity is a relational identity made
through, by, and within communication with other individuals (Hecht, 1993). CTI’s assertion that the layers in which identity formation occurs—personal, relational, enacted, and communal—are inextricably linked is also supported in these results. No frame in the results could be fully discussed or understood without at least referencing another frame. Participants never exclusively spoke of one frame. Instead, they described how they self-identify, which was influenced by their communal identities; they described how their relationships were affected by the expression of their identities. Their identities were and are an amalgamation of sources and causes, of interdependence of the relational, communal, enacted, and personal frames, which “are perspectives on a whole (and holistic), integrated identity” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 267). In their interdependence, the frames also served to juxtapose components of their identities, which could be most seen in the identity gaps, where discrepancies appeared between the frames. Some examples of this were revealed in the gaps between self-regard as a Roberts descendant and enactment of that identity and between personal and communal knowledge. Future research using CTI might further explore how identity gaps that take place between more than one frame, such as the enacted-relational-communal gap, are present in Roberts descendants, as well.

**Critical Race Theory**

Additionally, the results spoke well to CRT’s assumption that race is socially constructed and that historical realities are integral to understanding present realities of race (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). In all four frames discussed in the results, racial identity was tied to closely to historical conceptions of race, both on a systemic and personal level, while also being a byproduct of the participants’ lived experiences. That is, historical and present realities as well as and macro and micro dimensions of race affected descendants’ identities. This was apparent from the way many participants were able to glean information about their current
positions from their family histories—such as Charles’ family passing for white—and also from the ways their own experiences of being white, Black, and biracial were developed by their unique positionalities. No participants’ stories were the same, about their relationship to the settlement or otherwise, regardless of similarities that existed within geographic, temporal, economic, and familial dimensions; but the results showed that some of their experiences and/or sentiments were similar. This points to the acknowledgement of CRT that, while similarities may exist between people of the same racial groups because of racial systems, lived experience accounts for nuanced understandings of people’s identities.

**Findings about Race**

One way that lived experience related to racial identities was through the important finding that misinterpreting race for both monoracial and multiracial people is a common reason for experiencing identity gaps. Visual racial ambiguity problematizes the dominant US perception of “pure” and “commonsense” racial categories that have long since been upheld through both legal discourse and everyday sense-making. When someone is not easily racially categorizable, “The racially ambiguous individual is stigmatized as ‘deviant’ or ‘problematic’ until the ambiguity is resolved (Grier, et al., 2014). Interpersonally, this stigmatization can often lead to dissonance in the form of the personal-relational identity gap, because an individual’s personal knowledge and self-identification conflicts with what others perceive them to be. In this study, many participants expressed how their racial ambiguity negatively affected their interpersonal relationships, especially when meeting people for the first time. This ranged from Lory, Miles, and Jordan being mistaken for white and hearing racially insensitive comments to Ursula not being initially accepted into Black social groups in college. Scholarship about multiracial people and racial ambiguity (Gaither, 2015; Nadal, et al., 2013) is more prevalent
than scholarship about monoracial racially ambiguous people. Research about the racial ambiguity of monoracial people could further explore how phenotype in a US culture that is increasing in racial and ethnic diversity, challenges foundational notions of race in the US context, namely that race is an easily-ascribable, fixed identity. As phenotype becomes an unreliable indicator of race in the US, the racial systems might evolve into systems similar to those in Latin America, where race relies upon many factors, including socioeconomic status and ethnic affiliation (Prewitt, 2013). Investigating the experiences of racially ambiguous people, such as many interviewed in this study, could provide further information about the future of racialized experiences in the US.

This finding highlights the body as not only a means of creating messages, but also a message itself, which points to the ways in which the four overlapping frames of CTI are ultimately physically anchored to the body. While I used CTI to articulate various intangible aspects of identity, it is important to note that identities are housed within people, who, as critical race theorists posit, are inevitably and routinely coded for racial data. In this way, this study confirms the compatibility of CTI and CRT and their potential to be applied to both intangible and tangible elements of race and identity.

**Findings about Family**

Another key finding of this study was the many ways that people do or enact their relationships with extended family. This included engaging in genealogy research, taking part in efforts to connect members of the family to each other, and attending annual homecomings. Research in the realm of communication has addressed the role of extended family members in African American families, such as Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau’s (2003) book on African American communication. However, less scholarship has examined how extended families,
beyond one generation removed from the latest generation, are sustained through relational maintenance.

Findings from this study revealed how many participants’ experiences with extended family ranged from high-engagement and relational closeness to low-engagement and loose relational ties and that “extended family” in this context encompasses a larger range than most people in the US conceptualize. To Roberts descendants, it often means multiple degrees of separation across multiple generations.

These findings demonstrate the diversity of individuals’ understanding of and relational enactment within the community and cohesiveness within this community’s understanding of family and kin. As a community, Roberts Settlement and now Roberts descendants hold “a repertoire of identities that are jointly held/remembered and taught to new members (Hecht, 1993). Of this repertoire, both knowledge and close relationships are an integral part of the community’s identity. Because communities, like personal identities, are emergent, enacted, and hierarchically ordered by social roles (Hecht, 1993), it will be interesting to see in the future which components of communal identity—relational closeness or personal knowledge—become hierarchically dominant. As seen in the communal-relational gap and personal-enacted gap, many descendants feel tension because of their lack of relational closeness to other descendants, which may indicate that relational closeness is one of the community’s dominant identities. Roberts settlement as an organization might want to consider how to better connect descendants who do not have this central identity.

Further research could explore how and why people maintain extended family relationships to this degree, especially in the context of specific historic locations, such as settlements, communes, and other intentional communities. Future research concerning relational
maintenance in extended families could provide more insight into how these relationships are sustained over time and how race is a relevant factor in those relationships. As families become more racially and ethnically diverse, studies concerning these matters could help reveal the familial realities experienced by many in the US. Additionally, future research could investigate what motivates or inhibits families to pass down family knowledge. This could further scholarship within the subdisciplines of interpersonal and family communication about family stories and storytelling (Kellas, 2013; Kellas & Trees, 2013; Sleeter, 2016) and shed light on the factors that lead to the creation of family history through stories.

**Findings about Roberts Settlement’s History**

In the context of this study, family history also means public history. So, while participants found personal significance in their heritage of Roberts Settlement, they also questioned why histories like the history of the settlement are not often included in K-12 curriculum about Black history. This demonstrates a need for improved education about Black history and US history in classrooms, where Black history is often taught through “decontextualized narratives, stereotypical constructs, and unfulfilling images of Black heroes and heroines” (King & Brown, 2014, p. 24), a sentiment expressed by many participants in their own experience. Many participants wondered why their Black history education included mostly slavery and the Civil Rights Movement and excluded the stories of free people of color, which they felt would have benefited them.

Afrocentric curriculum’s goal is to combat the hegemonic norms within classrooms that socialize students to feel shame about their history and that spread limited information about African and African American identity (Asante, 1999; Teasley, et al., 2016), and while Afrocentricity is not possible in all curriculums, it is possible to include more varied experiences
of Black history within classrooms. Roberts Settlement as an organization has partnered with community programs to inform people about this particular history in Indiana, but more can be done within classrooms, especially in Indiana, to illuminate the diverse history of people of color in the US, including the history of Roberts Settlement. This could help students of color have more positive experiences within the classroom (L. King & Brown, 2014; Martell, 2013) and could help students of all races develop better racial literacy (King, 2016). Perhaps future endeavors could bring the history of Roberts Settlement into curriculum in Indiana, where the geographic proximity might help establish relevance to the students.

**Unexpected Findings**

In addition to important findings, some unexpected findings emerged from the data. One unexpected finding in this study was the number of participants who identified as Black but who qualified their identification by noting their light skin color. Five participants did this. This study found interesting results concerning Black people with light skin, notably that they experience visual racial ambiguity like multiracial people, as discussed before, and that a shift away from a geographical homeplace in which one is readily identified as Black, can lead to an integration period in a new place, where a light skinned Black person might feel the need to “prove” the authenticity of their Blackness to others (Nguyen & Anthony, 2014). Future research might build on previous research about Black people with light skin (Cunningham, 1997) and expand upon the racial passing of other groups (Rodriguez, 2000) to draw new conclusions about their particular identities in today’s time.

**Limitations**

Having discussed the findings, the last topic is limitations of the study. One limitation of this study was in the sampling procedure. Because this study involved snowball sampling and
relied on a pre-existing network of people within the Roberts Settlement email list and Facebook page, I was unable to reach Roberts descendants who were further removed from the community of Roberts descendants. By collecting data in a way that necessitated pre-existing connections, I automatically excluded descendants not connected through these resources, which narrowed the scope of the sample. Additionally, snowball sampling may have favored some branches of the Roberts family tree over others, so the sample may not be representative of all Roberts descendants.

The second limitation of this study, that is true of all qualitative studies involves the trustworthiness of the data. I did not verify the participants’ identities as Roberts descendants. In addition, their life experiences could not be verified, and this puts into question the trustworthiness of the results. Participants also may have been hesitant to divulge some truths about their experiences or their family experiences. To help encourage honesty in participants, I made their confidentiality a priority, so that they would feel more comfortable sharing their experiences.

**Reflexivity**

Before I began interviewing the participants, I asked myself the questions I planned to ask them. Throughout this process, some of those answers changed, in a way that conversing with dozens of people about the same topic helps one reconsider initial ways of understanding. What does it mean for me to be a Roberts descendant? At first, this answer was tied exclusively to the past. I was interested in the early settlers, proud of their accomplishments, curious about their inner lives. Now, my answer has expanded with my contact with other descendants. I am interested in them, proud of who they are, curious about who they describe themselves to be. I am thankful for the new people I have met and for the potential relationships that have come
from this project. Whereas I had seen my identity as a descendant as something more concerning the past, I now see it from the fullness of the present. This identity would not and probably could not be as meaningful without the many other descendants who are presently invested in their identities as well.

Many participants shared in my identity as someone who had not grown up knowing about the settlement, and it was encouraging to hear the ways that others have integrated or are going through the process of integrating their identities as descendants into their understanding of themselves. Some of their answers confirmed my own experiences with uncertainty about how I relate to this community. Ali named his experience as being an “outside Roberts,” as someone who did not belong to what he understands to be “the core” of the community. I understand this sentiment, and I have thought throughout this process about how my own etic, in some ways, positionality may have not been as useful as a more insider, emic perspective. But I did see in the end that my positionality allowed me to build rapport with participants who were in the same boat as me, so to speak, who are still making sense of who they are in relation to the settlement and to its community. While this question for me has not been fully answered, through this project, I do feel closer to some descendants, and this scholarly contribution may create opportunities for more relational growth.

Like the majority of the participants expressed, I am both hopeful and concerned about the future of the settlement and its descendants. How long will homecomings continue? How long will descendants of the settlement own land near the chapel and cemetery? Will generations to come invest in this community? I hear both the optimism and the uncertainty in these questions. Generational differences, political climates, funding, and interest are all possible barriers to the settlement’s future. Yet, I see the resilience and determination I have read about in
the early settlers in many of the descendants today. It is my hope that this project might contribute to the labor that has gone on for centuries to preserve this history, our history. I see this research as not only an investigation or as scholarship, but as a celebration of the participants and their lives and their communities. This research process has allowed me to understand other descendants better, to think more critically about my place in this community, and to join in with others whose labor for this community has persisted for decades. And for that I am grateful.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Roberts descendants represent a geographically and racially diverse group of people who, though they are separated by miles, by generations, and by differing experiences, are tied together by the common thread of ancestry. While the realities of racial systems in the US have affected their lives, descendants continue to disrupt racial systems through their persistence in forging communities and relationships across racial and ethnic boundaries. As May said, “There’s room for all of us at the table…Let the genealogy, let our ancestors bring us together, no matter how we identify.”

The history of Roberts Settlement continues to be formed through its descendants. Like the early Roberts and their kin who turned toward one another to make a way for themselves in the Hoosier wilderness, so too Roberts descendants today turn toward one another to find greater meaning and significance in their communicatively constructed identities.
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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT SHEET

Roberts Settlement Descendants: Our Voices
Principal Investigator: Charnell Peters, Graduate Student
School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University

Informed Consent for all participants

Introduction: My name is Charnell Peters, and I am a graduate student of media and communication at Bowling Green State University. I am interested in learning more about Roberts descendants, as I am a Roberts descendant myself.

Purpose: This research study seeks to (a) understand and describe how Roberts descendants communicate their identities and (b) to examine the structure of race in the construction of Roberts descendants’ identities. Any person who identifies as a descendant of Roberts Settlement and is at least 18 years old may participate. Findings from this study will contribute to understanding the legacy of Roberts Settlement. While this study is not intended to directly benefit its participants, participants may benefit from speaking about their experiences.

Procedure: Participation in this study consists of answering a series of interview questions. I approximate the entire study will take 60 minutes to complete. The interview will be conducted in a one-on-one setting with me in a professional and private environment, such as a public library meeting room, or via phone or Skype. At the end of the interview session, you will receive a debriefing sheet.

Voluntary nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions, avoid topics, or discontinue participation at any time. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your relationship with Bowling Green State University or with Roberts Settlement in any way.

Confidentiality Protection: All of your responses will be kept confidential. In your interview session, the researcher will ask you to create a pseudonym, thereby separating your unique name and identity from your responses. Although your interview responses will be maintained on a digital audio recorder, I will not link any of your answers to your specific identity. All digital copies of your contact information and interview documents, including recorded files and transcripts will be stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. All hard copies of interview documents, including interview notes, will be stored in a locked cabinet. If you indicate consent electronically I will print the consent, attach it to a physical copy of this consent form and file it in a locked cabinet. I am the only person who will have access to these documents. I will keep the information for two years at which time it will be destroyed. If you are completing this interview via Skype, please clear your internet browser and page history before beginning.

Risks: Participation in this study involves minimal risk; the risk of participation is no greater than that experienced in daily life. I will be asking questions regarding your experiences that may feel very personal to you. As mentioned above, your participation is
entirely voluntary and you may leave the study at any time. I will work diligently to
safeguard your confidentiality and ensure your privacy. Any self-identifying information
provided through your interview answers will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms
in the transcription process. For example, if you specify the name of a family member or
a specific organization, I will replace those names with pseudonyms to protect all parties’
identities. If you do experience any distress from your participation, I recommend
contacting the National Alliance on Mental Illness at 800-950-6264 or info@nami.org.

Contact information: If you have any questions about this research project, please contact me
(Charnell Peters, Principal Investigator) at cdpeter@bgsu.edu or by phone at (419) 372-8349. Or
you may contact this study’s Advisor, Dr. Lisa K. Hanasono at LisaKH@bgsu.edu or by phone
at 419-372-3512. You may also contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at 419-372-
7716 or orc@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this
research. Thank you for your time!

Indication of Consent:
I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I am at
least 18 years old. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered, and I
have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in
this research.

If the interview is being conducted in person, please sign below. If the interview is being
conducted via phone or Skype, please offer verbal consent before the interview begins.

Participant’s Printed Name   Signature   Date
APPENDIX B. SEMI-STRUCTURED SCHEDULE OF QUESTIONS

I. Introduction
   a. What made you interested in participating in this study?
   b. How and when did you learn about Roberts Settlement?
      i. What was that experience like?

II. Personal Identity
   a. Please describe yourself:
      i. What aspects of your identity are more important to you?
      ii. Why are these aspects of your identity important to you?
   b. What does it mean for you to be a Roberts descendant?
      i. Is your identity as a Roberts descendant significant to you? Why or why not?
   c. How do you identify racially?
      i. Is your identity as a(n) [insert race] person significant to you? Why or why not?
      ii. Can you describe a time when your race affected your life in some way?

III. Relational Identity
   a. What are some of your most important relationships?
      i. Why are these important?
   b. Do you know other Roberts descendants?
      i. How would you describe your relationships with other Roberts descendants?
      ii. Have those relationships changed over time?

IV. Enacted Identity
   a. Have you ever been to Roberts Settlement? Why did you go? Who did you go with?
   b. Have you ever attended a Homecoming at Roberts Settlement?
      i. If yes, when? What was that experience like?
   a. Is there anything you do or do not do because you are a Roberts descendant?

V. Communal Identity
   a. Do you think Roberts Settlement is important? Why or why not?
   b. What does it mean to be a Roberts descendant, in general?
   d. What does it mean to be a part of your racial group?
   e. How does your racial group relate to the history of Roberts Settlement?

VI. Closing and Snowball Sampling
   a. What else would you like to share with me today?
b. As stated in the consent form, I will be using pseudonyms to ensure your confidentiality. Do you have any suggested pseudonym?

c. In the upcoming weeks, I plan to interview more people for this study. Do you know of anyone who might be interested in participating in this interview project? If so, would you please share this flyer with them?
DATE: October 23, 2017

TO: Charnell Peters
FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [1137506-2] Roberts Settlement Descendants: Our Voices
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 21, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: October 11, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-
COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on October 11, 2018. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board's records.