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## Generational Dream: First Generation American Citizens and Their Relationship to the American Dream

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# Generational Dream: First Generation American Citizens and Their Relationship to the American Dream

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Senior Honors Thesis in American Studies

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*"It's as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands—which today appears to mean that in the United States, anything is possible if you want it badly enough."*<sup>1</sup>-Jim Cullen

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. (Oxford University Press. 2003), page 5.

## Introduction

In the 2012 presidential election, President Obama released a commercial detailing his plan for a second term presidency. This video, which circulated public television for several months preceding the election, features the President sitting in presumably the average American's living room talking about his plan for the next four years. As he describes his plan, he makes sure to strongly evoke what he refers to as the necessary "nation-building" which he will continue in the next four years. One of his last lines states: "its time for a new economic patriotism rooted in the belief that growing our economy begins with a strong, thriving middle-class," as pictures of suburban houses cross the screen fluidly.<sup>2</sup> In order to hit home with voters, President Obama had to appeal to middle-class sentiments of economic anxiety that was hindering many members of the middle-class from achieving social mobility. This age old anxiety was especially prevalent during the 2012 election, an election that focused on relieving the consequences of the economic recession. The goal in this advertisement is to convince the American people that this candidate will help to build an America where the middle-class is a strong and an achievable ideal for all. This idea of a dream that has potential for all Americans is not new.

In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the term "American Dream" in his three-volume history of the United States, *The Epic of America*. As he metaphorically travels through the immense history of the nation from its founding, Truslow ends up focusing on what he sees as the American concept of "bigger and better" attitudes toward all aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> "Obama Campaign Ad: Read My Plan" YouTube, Posted by The Wall Street Journal. September 27, 2012

life and how this concept came to be. Adams suggests that this search for freedom and happiness goes back to the Puritan settlers and the beginning of American civilization as the New World held the promise of spiritual and material happiness for these refugees.<sup>3</sup> Adams describes the American Dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”<sup>4</sup> This original construction of the American Dream, or at least the beginning of the public naming of this idea, is clear about the equality for all who are willing to work hard to achieve success. This idea is an essential aspect of the American ethos and persists.

As shown by President Obama’s advertisement, images and rhetoric of the American Dream are alive and well in contemporary American society. The fact that these strong depictions of the American Dream are so integral in winning over voters shows that this concept (or myth, as some scholars refer to it) remains crucial in terms of our public discourse and yet it is not entirely clear how these images are digested by viewers. Although the President was clearly successful in that he won the election, I question the significance of the particular signifiers of the American Dream that this ad conjures. I define the American Dream as the American ethos and set of ideals in which all citizens are afforded the opportunity for social mobility in terms of financial success and educational

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<sup>3</sup> James Truslow Adams, *Epic of America*. (Little, Brown, 1931) pages 214-215

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 404

opportunities through the dedication of hard work, and as a pathway to full American inclusion. That being said, how do other young Americans process the President's version of the American Dream when proliferated through advertisements like the one aforementioned?

Last year, I found myself in a conversation regarding perceptions of opportunities for success in America with a few of my friends who are international students at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. I was shocked, although maybe shouldn't have been, that these students believed fully in the American Dream and the promises it offers. As a cynical liberal arts college junior with an eye for critiquing all things American, I doubted their belief in a concept I had long since believed was a baffling myth. Were they blind to all of the rampant structural inequalities in America? Couldn't they see the ways in which this rhetoric pacifies people who continuously worked hard for financial and educational success but to no avail? At first I thought this could be because they were not born in the U.S. and were studying here on temporary student visas, thus the promise of the American Dream is what brought them here to study in the first place, thus they had already achieved a major aspect of their American Dream: an education at an elite American liberal arts institution. I wondered, then, if these sentiments were mimicked by people who grew up here, but whose parents did not. This second demographic would help me to understand if the American Dream held any significance for the newest generation of Americans, the children of immigrants. First generation American citizens represent a group of Americans who have grown up in the United States and thus have experienced the indoctrination of this American Dream ethos from a young age. However, I hypothesized that they also carried with them, to some degree, their parents' history and culture, positioning them as

the perfect group of people to study if I am interested in understanding the American Dream and its contemporary implications. The children of immigrants are “the fastest growing segment of the U.S population” and thus are, and will be, massively important in the American social, political, economic and cultural fabric in the coming years.<sup>5</sup>

The following research describes my interactions with seven Colby College first-generation American students and the results are quite honestly not what I expected. This project works with this particular demographic through the interview process in order to draw conclusions about how these first-generation American citizens relate to the American Dream. Originally the goal of these interviews was to focus on the social aspects of the subjects’ lives as the children of immigrants, such as cultural assimilation struggles, language barriers and the problems that come with straddling two cultures (American culture and the culture of their parents’ home country). These were all problems that I was familiar with through the field of immigration studies and, quite frankly, I thought I would run into them again with this group. However, this project ended up focusing on contemporary aspects of their lives that affected opportunity, according to them, more so than being the children of immigrants. Ultimately, I focus on two major themes: an overwhelming disassociation with the American Dream concept and a sense that contemporary issues such as racial relations are more salient than immigration status to this group of first-generation American citizens.

## **Literature Review**

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<sup>5</sup> Soojin S. Oh and North Cooc, “Immigration Youth and Education.” (Harvard Educational Review, 2011) Pg. 398.

The study of the American Dream and its implications for first-generation American citizens, or the children of immigrants, falls into two major categories of scholarship in disciplines including American Studies, history, cinema and cultural studies. Examination of this relationship calls upon two major fields of study: scholarly work done on the American Dream, and work done in the field of Immigration studies. The American Dream as a category, which I will focus on at the forefront, has attracted several scholars, historians and cultural critics alike. I use these varying perspectives on the American Dream and its implications to construct an understanding of the ethos and to situate my subjects in a particular contemporary moment. In other words, my understanding of the history of the concept and the differing perspectives on its social realities and relevance are crucial to the study. The scholarship of the American Dream spans a number of years, from 1931 to the present. In short, it is clear that the older historians and sociologists believe in the tenets of the American Dream quite strongly, while the contemporary scholars question and challenge it more deeply. Scholarship in immigration studies provides the other major field of which I utilize. Within this vast field of work, immigration scholarship overall tends to focus on five major themes: children of immigration, race and ethnicity, language, location, and cultural factors of migration. Often this work does overlap, as studies of immigration take on several of these factors. This field is much harder to characterize since scholars take on many different aspects, although when focusing on the children of immigrants, it can generally be split up between assimilationist and anti-assimilationists. However, both factions agree on the importance of this demographic as it will prove to be an influential force in the near future with its expanding numbers.

Although the public naming of the concept comes from Adams as mentioned earlier, perhaps the most famous examples of the American Dream as seen through popular literature comes from the chronicles of Horatio Alger in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His depictions of rags-to-riches stories, first from his twelve-part story in the magazine *Student and Schoolmate* and then eventually into his first novel *Ragged Dick*, arguably mark Alger as the chief adaptor of the formula of the dream, as articulated by Adams, in American literature. *Ragged Dick* is the story of a poor shoe-shining boy named Dick Hunter in 1860's New York City. Dick, like many other children at this time, sleeps on the street, smokes and drinks. Yet unlike other boys, Dick is ambitious and seeks "to turn over a new leaf and try to grow up 'spectable.'"<sup>6</sup> Alger frames Dick as an honorable young man who, although under dire circumstances, "would not steal or cheat or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and straight forward and self-reliant."<sup>7</sup> He was determined to get an education and, as it goes, "pull himself up by his bootstraps." Through a series of coincidental encounters with wealthy men who are impressed by his determination to succeed as well as his honor and virtue, Dick is able to leave his vagabond lifestyle behind and live that of a respectable man, officially by changing his name from Dick to Richard. Thus the archetypal American Dream character, meant to represent the average American, is created: fortune will improve if one works hard to acquire an education, takes advantage of every opportunity and has good character. This work also signifies the birth of this character into popular American culture. This theme of the American Dream did not lose

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<sup>6</sup> Horatio Alger Jr. *Ragged Dick*. (New York: A.K Loring Publishing, 1868), page 67

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 13



traction over the ensuing century, and in fact spread to other realms of popular culture, such as television.

Some seventy years later, accounts of the American Dream narrative's popularity in the film industry proves its continued salience. Leo Rosten's "A 'Middletown' Study of Hollywood," in 1939 shows how the American Dream formed the backbone of the American film industry. At the outset, Rosten argues for the significance of motion pictures' influence on the American populace. "In many ways the motion picture has usurped sovereignty over standards of success, integrity, courtesy and sophistication."<sup>8</sup> Similar to cultural critic Samuel Lawrence who will be discussed later, Rosten sees the American Dream as a constant:

In a society convulsed by the processes of change, motion pictures reiterate the American Dream in its most naïve and reassuring outlines: success is assured, endings are happy, boy gets girl; honesty is always rewarded, evil always punished; individual effort triumphs over all obstacles, there is always room at the top, you can't keep a good man down. Optimism is basic and irrevocable; romance is of the essence. For a society engaged in critical social and economic readjustment, the movies buttress wistful fantasies of luck, wealth, success and—above all—the values of the acquisitive way of living.<sup>9</sup>

For Rosten, this has significant effects on the social fabric of America in that "whatever the desires or the intentions of the men who make the movies, the medium possesses inexorable normative consequences" for the people who watch them.<sup>10</sup> He also analyzes motion pictures' "crude typology" and tendency to create stereotypes through their content.<sup>11</sup> Because movies have such a profound influence on American consciousness,

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<sup>8</sup> Leo Rosten, "A 'Middletown' Study of Hollywood." *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. (1939): page 315

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, page 315

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, page 315

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, page 316

what they show is reflected in the manners and values of Americans. Rosten argues for the extraordinary power of film as a medium for social reflection and change and claims that movies are perpetuators of the American Dream, creating a cycle of optimism in the collective imagination of Americans. Stories of success and ambition continue to circulate in popular American culture. These narratives continue to be in high demand—as can be shown with the box office numbers from countless quintessential rags-to-riches films such as “The Pursuit of Happyness”—demonstrating that this concept has not left American social consciousness. Given that film has a unique way of registering American cultural norms and thoughts, the American Dream’s place in them is of no small significance.

At the start of the twenty-first century, one can see how the American Dream still holds significance for many in that it has been studied by several and popular historians, including some television personalities. For example, Dan Rather’s *The American Dream: Stories From the Heart of our Nation* is a fairly recent account of how the American Dream functions in the U.S in the early 2000’s. It focuses on the nation’s earliest ideals and how they resonate in today’s world. As a “feel-good” read, Rather details stories from all over the country about how individuals have “made it” on the premise of the American Dream. He concludes that the United States is still a place where hard work, dedication and determination can make dreams come true. He claims that it is the American Dream that binds us together as a society and steers us towards the ideals of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>12</sup> By tracking ordinary people around the country who are doing or have done extraordinary things, Rather attempts to show how the founding principles are

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<sup>12</sup> Dan Rather, *The American Dream: Stories From the Heart of our Nation* (HarperCollins, 2002).

alive and well and are inherently inclusive in nature. This is important because this book, circulating as a “social” read, is meant to convince Americans that the American Dream is real and always has been. The positive response to this book, as can be shown through its commercial success and by readers’ comments online, also shows a specific audience’s acceptance of this idea at some capacity.

In a more recent account, Jim Cullen’s *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* from 2003 can be seen as a direct response to Adams’ work, *The Epic of America*. Cullen’s short history of the American Dream, or rather its several manifestations, explores the meanings that have reflected and shaped American identity since the Pilgrims. Cullen claims that in order to assess the possibilities and limits of the American Dream, it is necessary, and required, for intense scrutiny that it is not commonly given to the concept. He wants to prove that the concept is virtually taken for granted: “It’s as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands—which today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough.”<sup>13</sup> The American Dream is arguably the most subconsciously (or quite consciously for some) valued American characteristic, yet it is one that is not challenged and is assumed as inherent truth. This is dangerous in that if it is considered truth and thus untouchable, those who fail to achieve success are assumed to have not worked hard and consequently become devalued in American society. There are thus very real, material consequences of thinking of the American Dream as a fixed, assumed ideal. Conversely, those who do achieve material success may be seen, and see themselves, as

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<sup>13</sup> Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. (Oxford University Press, 2003), page 5.

hard working and thus “deserving” of their success. This side has different set of negative consequences in that those who are privileged come to see their successes as based off of hard work and determination void of advantage. This is equally dangerous as one side of dream thus works to give those of privilege a justification as to why they have succeeded while others have not. In essence, the dream serves as a sheet over the persistent structural inequalities by posing as an equalizer. It must be said, at the outset, that, “such a reckoning begins with a recognition that the Dream is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways.”<sup>14</sup> There is no answer to whether the American Dream is “true” or not, but it must be (and Cullen argues, hasn’t been) critically analyzed at its core. Cullen does not seek to answer this question of truth, but rather seeks to assess the history of the concept’s inception from the Puritans to present day in order to unpack the implications that, he claims, “can cut different ways.” Cullen begins by noting that the United States, unlike most other nations, defines itself not on the facts of blood, religion, language, geography, or shared history, but on a set of ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and consolidated in the Constitution. For example, since the U.S is known as “the melting pot of the world” for its multicultural grounding, not every American has a shared common history. Yet the set of ideals encompassed in the American Dream are supposed to be the defining features in linking all Americans. This creation of a collective imagination became somewhat of a “lingua franca, an idiom that everyone—from corporate executives to hip-hop artists—can presumably understand” during the late 1980’s in which the U.S

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 7

experienced increasing economic and racial stratification.<sup>15</sup> Yet since this ideal stands in for a tangible force uniting all Americans, one must consider what happens when a citizen experiences a structural barrier and denial of their dream? Does this put them in a category of non-citizen?

Whereas Adams cites the Puritans and others in the history of the U.S as originators and proponents of the American Dream, Cullen cites them as the greatest of ironies: “the foundations were laid by people who specifically rejected a belief that they *did* have control over their destinies.”<sup>16</sup> He tracks the Dream from the Puritans to the Civil War to Civil Rights, and eventually lands on the present moment. Cullen cites cultural critic Jennifer Hochschild, who takes on contemporary aspects of the American Dream, such as race. Hochschild “compiles data suggesting that working-class black Americans, for example, believe in the American Dream with an intensity that baffles and even appalls more affluent African Americans, who see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement.”<sup>17</sup> This shows how differently the Dream is perceived among social classes and along race lines.

In the end, Cullen concedes that the American Dream “would have no drama or mystique if it were a self-evident falsehood or scientifically demonstrable principle. Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals.”<sup>18</sup> That being said, he is not attempting to prove the American Dream true or false, unlike some of the other scholars in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 6

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 10

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 6

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, page 7

the field; he simply wishes to track the idea as a historical artifact and use his findings as evidence for the need to interrogate it on multiple levels.

Samuel R. Lawrence traces the narrative of the American Dream as expressed through popular culture since Adam's coining of the phrase in 1931. In contrast to other scholars, Lawrence takes a firmer stance on not believing in the American Dream, although he does not negate its importance: "the problem, of course, is that it does not exist. The American Dream's not being real, however, ultimately turns out to be the most significant finding about it; the fact that many of us have assumed it to be entirely real makes the story more compelling."<sup>19</sup> Lawrence argues, in fact, that "[n]o other idea or mythology—even religion, I believe—had as much influence on our individual and collective lives, with the Dream as one of the precious few things in this country that we all share."<sup>20</sup> Like Cullen, he draws on the Dream as one of the only uniting factors of Americans. According to Lawrence, one of the defining characteristics of the Dream is that due to its ambiguity, it has continually morphed and adapted as needed, yet somehow always stays the same.

Lawrence goes decade by decade using popular sources to tell the story of the American Dream, from the Great Depression, to the post war years, to the counterculture 1960's and 70's, to the patriotism of the 1980's, the disappointing 1990's and finally to today. He argues, "As the world becomes increasingly flat and the nation becomes increasingly multicultural, the Dream will play an even more important role...a key common denominator and unifying force."<sup>21</sup> Lawrence argues that the Dream's power and

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Samuel, *The American Dream*. (Syracuse University Press, 2012), page 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. page 2

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, page 3

relevance today remain as strong as ever in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that all signs point to the Dream continuing to be a compelling part of the cultural landscape of the U.S in the years to come. This speculation, in contrast to his personal beliefs about the Dream, is relevant to my study in that many of the subjects admit at the forefront to not believing in the American Dream but believe in its significance for other Americans and for the country at large. This is particularly visible with the students of color that I interview, who also do not believe in the functional dream but do believe in a mythical version. This says important things about the American Dream and race.

Author and professor of African-American studies Jennifer L. Hochschild, in *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*, contends that Americans have failed to “face up” to what the American Dream requires of its society, and yet it is the belief system that, she feels, can save the United States from disorder. “Millions of immigrants and internal migrants have moved to America, and around within it, to fulfill their version of the American Dream. By objective measures and their own account, many have achieved success. Probably just as many have been defeated and disillusioned.”<sup>22</sup> Like Lawrence, Hochschild is very critical of the American Dream and focuses on race as a way of demonstrating its structural barriers. Some scholars focus on immigration and its connection to the American Dream because it is so essential to the American story: the American Dream is what has drawn immigrants to American shores arguably for centuries. Many of the subjects in my study state that this narrative is what drew their parents to migrate to the U.S. from their respective countries, although each for a variety of reasons.

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream* (Princeton University Press, 1995) page 15.

The majority of work on the American Dream and immigration, however, focuses on voluntary immigration, whereas Hochschild's work focuses on those who were forced to the United States from Africa by way of slavery and thus have to "come to terms with a dream that was not originally theirs."<sup>23</sup> Focusing on African Americans, Hochschild attributes national distress to the ways in which this group of has come to view their own and each other's opportunities. Hochschild argues that racial tensions and conflict may demolish what she believes is America's only unifying vision. Hochschild takes an adamant stand against believing in the American Dream: "As a factual claim, [the idea that no one is barred from the pursuit of the dream] is largely false; for most of American history, women of any race and men who were Native American, Asian, black, or poor were barred form all but a narrow range of 'electable futures.'"<sup>24</sup> This clearly has several implications beyond racism and sexism: "The emotional potency of the American Dream had made people who were able to identify with it the norm for everyone else."<sup>25</sup> This mirrors Cullen's idea that accepting the dream as inherent truth is dangerous in its exclusionary nature. As such, according to Hochschild, the American Dream was and is putatively white and male. This concept is essential in my analysis of the interviews with the subjects of color in my research, as many of them refuse to align with the ethos of the American Dream, as they see it as exclusively for white Americans.

Hochschild highlights the relationship between whites and blacks and the perspectives of each other's opportunities. She shows how since the 1960's, white

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page 15

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, page 26

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, page 26



Americans have thought that African Americans have had better and better chances to achieve the Dream. At the same time, many African Americans have grown disillusioned by the promises of the dream and the progress of their race. This analysis also directly correlates with the results found in my research. Despite her adamant attacks on the failures of the American Dream, Hochschild concludes that the only way to fix the social disaster of increasing racial conflict lies within the American dream's tenets of inclusiveness, optimism and discipline.

Immigration studies is central to these ideas of the American Dream, as it must be studied in order to get a fuller picture of the concept in the United States. Literary scholarship in this field includes sociological, ethnographical and psychological approaches to immigration and first generation Americans. This field can, for the most part, be divided into four categories: race and ethnicity, language, location and cultural factors in experience. Scholarship on immigration is vast and deals with these categories in varied ways, often, if not always, overlapping then with one another.

The "New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965" is a compilation of pieces assembled by the Harvard University Press about contemporary issues in immigration. In a piece titled "Language," David Lopez and Vanesa Estrada describe the importance of language in the experience of the children of immigrants. The authors start by noting the trend of rapid language assimilation to English competency in the U.S and that the dominance of English is seen as a positive development because shared language is seen as a necessary condition for the functioning of democracy in the U.S. They admit that the ability of immigrants and their offspring to speak English is a potent political issue and has

historically been so: Benjamin Franklin worried about the Germans in colonial America learning English and Theodore Roosevelt declared in 1907 that “we have room for but one language here, and that is the English language.”<sup>26</sup> Lopez and Estrada make it clear what they wish to accomplish with this piece:

The question we ask here is whether in an increasingly globalized world and in a nation more attuned to multiculturalism and respect for ethnicity, we might expect greater bilingualism in the future. This hinges on the question of whether the children and grandchildren of today’s immigrants are maintaining competency in their immigrant languages in addition to being fluent in English.<sup>27</sup>

In a 2000 General Social Survey, 75% of Americans said “speaking English as the common national language is what united all Americans.”<sup>28</sup> This conception of language clearly has significant implications on meanings of citizenship for these children of immigrants because a lack of assimilation to the English language thus works to effectively exclude them from American citizenship. If immigrants do not learn the English language, they are not allowed citizenship, and certainly not the American Dream that supposedly comes tied to it. Since the first migrants to the U.S were originally from predominately white European countries and spoke English, the homogenization of language with English as the standard works to equate “American” with “white.” The problem of language rarely surfaced in my research as an impediment to success, but this omission is telling: it was simply assumed that my subjects would learn English if they wanted to succeed in America,

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<sup>26</sup> David Lopez and Vanesa Estrada, “Language.” *New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965*. (Harvard University Press, 2007) page 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, page 1

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*. page 1

even those who came from families with a different language as their custom.<sup>29</sup> English is an implicit and unspoken requirement of the American Dream, thus those who do not speak it are at a clear systematic disadvantage.

As the authors suggest, Americans have actively sought to discourage bilingualism. For example, the Bilingual Education Act of 1986 expired in 2002 and was renamed the English Language Acquisition Act. Lopez and Estrada cite Portes and Rumbaut's study that found that by high school graduation, 88% of children of immigrants whose homes spoke another language, preferred to speak English themselves and only 28% could be classified as fully bilingual. This trend was shown with my subjects who are bilingual as well: all of them said that they preferred to speak English, even if they speak a different language at home. This shows the effects of the active deterioration of bilingualism that takes place in the U.S. Perhaps this is why my subjects did not care to discuss language; although it exists in their lives, there is little potential for legitimate bilingualism in their futures so they ignore the subject completely. In conclusion, Lopez and Estrada berate Americans as "out of step" with the rest of the world that values multilingualism and in turn multiculturalism.<sup>30</sup> Although the authors' views are somewhat idealistic, they are in line with a current sentiment to establish a society that values multiculturalism in the U.S. The concept of multiculturalism is integral to later parts of my analysis in which I critique the contemporary ways in which multiculturalism is enforced in the U.S. Many of these subjects feel as if the American Dream is an outdated concept in its failure to incorporate this sense

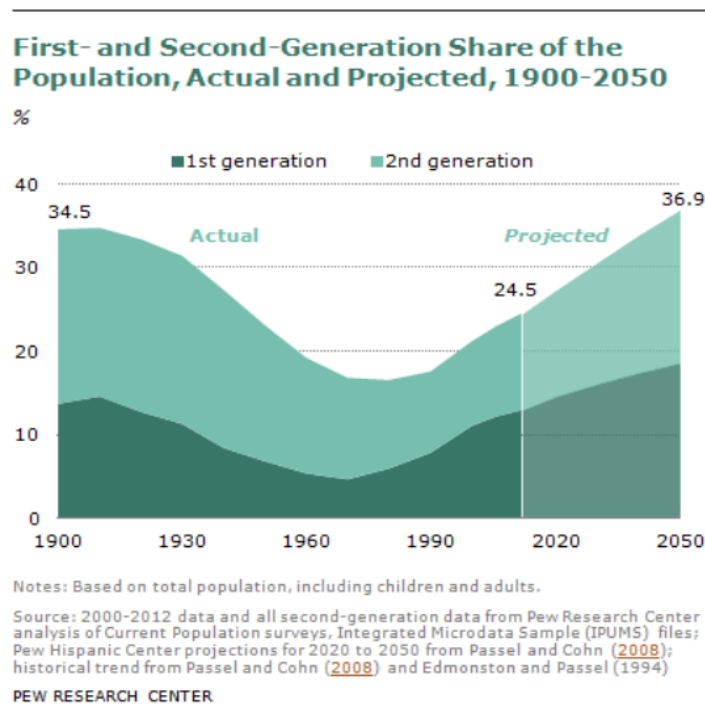
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<sup>29</sup> Four of the seven subjects interviewed are from families whose primary language was not English. All four thus grew up in bilingual households, but had little to say regarding this topic, other than Subjects 2 and 4, who noted that some cultural things are harder to explain to their parents in a different language which puts them at somewhat of a disadvantage.

<sup>30</sup> Idib. Page 1

of multiculturalism. In essence, they express that they believe the Dream was a concept meant for white people, and thus those of them who are not white do not associate with it.

Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut are experts in the field of immigrant second-generation experience in the United States. Both of their major works, *Legacies: The Story of Immigrant Second Generation*, and *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, characterize the field of study. These works are both based on the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), a study carried out during the 1990's on both coasts of the U.S, which followed over 5,200 youths from several dozen nationalities and said many interesting things about their patterns of acculturation, family and school life, identity, experiences of discrimination, self-esteem, ambition and achievement.



**Figure 1. Pew Research Center projections of Second-Generation population growth**

In *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*, Portes and Rumbaut document how the racial and ethnic composition of the population of the United States has changed in recent decades. They note that while the circumstances of new immigrants themselves are well documented, the experiences and fortunes of their children have only more recently begun to be explored. This is particularly important

considering that the children of immigrants make up a sizeable and rapidly growing component of the U.S population. A 1997 Current Population Survey noted that second generation immigrants made up 5% of all Americans and 20% of American children, in 2008, the number of second-generation immigrants grew to 24.5% and will undoubtedly grow even more. In fact, given current immigration trends and birth rates, “virtually all (93%) of the growth of the nation’s working-age population between now and 2050 will be accounted for by immigrants and their U.S.-born children,” according to a population projection by the Pew Research Center.<sup>31</sup> Figure 1 demonstrates the projected growth in this demographic up to 2050.

By bringing together both immigration and ethnicity scholars to examine the lives of children of immigrants, the authors are able to show the importance of their economic and social incorporation into the nation as a whole. The authors cannot stress the importance of this particular group of people enough, citing the National Academy of Sciences stating “As the predominantly white baby-boom generation reaches retirement age, it will depend increasingly for its economic support on the productivity, health and civic participation of adults who grew up in minority immigrant families.”<sup>32</sup> The fate of the country, according to Portes, Rumbaut and others, lies in the hands of the children of immigrants, not the immigrants themselves. This is why it is particularly important that we understand this

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<sup>31</sup> “Second-Generation Americans: A Portrait of the Adult Children of Immigrants,” *PewResearch Social & Demographic Trends*, February 7, 2013. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/07/second-generation-americans/>

<sup>32</sup> Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America*. (University of California Press, 2001), page 22.

demographic and their beliefs about success in this country, because soon enough they will make up the majority of the population.

Portes and Rumbaut's other major work in the field, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, also adds much to existing scholarship on second-generation immigrants, and focuses mostly on experiential research. The book offers a series of stories in the first chapter that provide a firsthand look at this emerging population including its fears, successes and dilemmas. The narratives clearly show how some ethnic groups are on the upward path, moving into society's mainstream quickly and enriching it with their culture in the process. Others, however, seem to be on a downward spiral, resembling today's impoverished domestic minorities. The authors make sure to emphasize the significance of this population for the future:

Combining American culture with the sights and sounds of a host of foreign lands, seeking to balance the pressures of immigrant families and native peers, and striving to fulfill the goals of material success and personal freedom that drove their parents here, the new second generation hold the key to what will happen to their respective ethnic groups and, to a large extent, to the cities where they cluster.<sup>33</sup>

Portes and Rumbaut explore parent-child conflicts, teacher-student and peer relationships to unpack the experience of this group. Most importantly, these scholars are the first ones in the field to let the subjects speak for themselves and tell their own stories through ethnographic research. This results in the exposure of the issues that matter most to this population, which according to this text was language, acculturation problems and ethnic and racial discrimination. I interrogate these issues in the interviews with my subjects,

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<sup>33</sup> Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of Immigrant Second Generation*. (University of California Press, 2001), page 2.

expecting to find many of the same patterns as in Portes and Rumnaut's ethnography. However, I was surprised when the subjects did not care to expand upon issues that I thought they might: assimilation/acculturation was hardly touched upon and language was, as aforementioned, not something that affected them in ways scholars told me it did for their subjects. Racial discrimination, however, played much larger of a part than expected, although ethnic discrimination was interestingly absent.

Some scholars take on the American Dream and immigration in terms of economics, an undoubtedly integral aspect of experience. Many of them believe that once a degree of success is achieved in this realm, other modes of incorporation will follow. William Clark's *Immigrants and the American Dream: Remaking the Middle Class* takes a look at recent immigrants, examining who they are and where they live in order to assess entry into the middle class. This is the most comprehensive account of examining the extent to which current immigrants are achieving the American Dream.<sup>34</sup> Clark uses location to discuss complex factors of opportunity for immigrants, to identify which new immigrants are advancing economically and where because "we know that immigrants from some backgrounds are especially successful, and more so in some states and cities than in others."<sup>35</sup> According to Clark, immigration is no longer a coastal urban phenomenon: smaller communities across the U.S are largely affected by contemporary immigration as well.<sup>36</sup> Clark focuses on immigrant achievement in terms of income level, professional status, rates of home ownership, and political participation in order to judge their middle

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<sup>34</sup> Here, I refer to the American Dream as registered economically/financially

<sup>35</sup> William Clark, *Immigrants and the American Dream: Remaking the Middle Class*. (The Guildford Press. 2003), preface xv.

<sup>36</sup> Although some of my subjects grew up in major U.S. cities, most hail from smaller towns around the country, including communities in Connecticut, Virginia, New Hampshire and California

class incorporation. Although he tries to take a middle road approach to views on immigration outcomes (neither completely optimistic nor pessimistic), his perspective “stressed the successful gains in occupations, industries, and housing markets.”<sup>37</sup> Clark argues that the middle-class American dream of professional employment, homeownership and a middle income is still desired and attainable by recent immigrants.

Clark is admittedly an assimilationist, and believes that “it is through adaptation and incorporation that the new immigrants are likely to make the greatest progress to the middle class.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike Portes and Rumbaut, Clark believes that “the story of immigrant success is best portrayed primarily through a statistical analysis” instead of interviews and anecdotes. Ultimately, Clark believes that immigrants can still make it in America and that their success is not isolated to a select number of source countries or solely to positively selected immigrant groups. Statistical analysis, however, only tells a portion of the story that I believe cannot be omitted when looking at this demographic. For example, his research only has the ability to look at numbers and thus cannot possibly extrapolate the kind of results that Clark does in his conclusion. This type of research completely ignores cultural impact and contemporary issues that absolutely affect this group and their success, and thus only has the potential to present half of the picture at play here. Since the American Dream and success are not only registered in terms of economics and deals very much with cultural incorporation, this form of empirical study does not work with this demographic.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Preface xvi

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Preface xvi.



Richard Alba and Victor Nee's *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* is the first systemic study of assimilation in the field since the 1960's. The authors argue that even though the countries of origin have shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America, assimilation still continues to characterize the immigrant experience. They contest, however, assimilation's negative connotation. "Since the 1960's [assimilation] has been seen in a mostly negative light, as a ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity" yet the authors posit that this view largely ignores any positive attributes of assimilation, such as its potential for ethnic groups to create networks to help each other through solidarity and support by those who are familiar with the culture.<sup>39</sup> In essence, they frame assimilation as positive because it makes it easier to succeed if one does so, and if financial and economic success is the goal here, than assimilation is the quickest route. These authors take on language, socioeconomic status, location and marriage as their main points of study, yet also note the ways in which race lines are blurred as Hispanics are increasingly incorporated into the American mainstream. In this way, they challenge the classic perception of the American mainstream as putatively white: just as the mainstream affects the immigrants, the immigrants in turn affect the mainstream culture. As more and more people of Hispanic decent come to the U.S and the generations grow up, the mainstream shifts to include more of the previously marginalized. Alba and Nee, like Clark, tend to see a positive future for immigrants in the U.S, noting that institutional changes like

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. (Harvard University Press, 2005), page 6.

immigration laws have created a more sympathetic environment for immigrants than has been the case in the past.

Cultural historians Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco focus solely on the children of immigrants in their book, *Children of Immigration* from 2002. The two authors are the co-directors of the Harvard Immigration Project and have spent two decades studying in this field. This particular work focuses on how to teach the children of immigrants, who are such an integral part of our contemporary moment, in order to meet their needs. The work deals mostly with understanding the complexities of their adaptation to a new cultural setting. These authors come to the conclusion that, at the time they were writing, experiences for immigrant youths were extremely polarized: either they were very successful and headed to fine collegiate institutions, or they were caught in negative situations like gangs, drugs or were in prison.<sup>40</sup> They note that most immigrant children, under the age of eighteen, arrive with high hopes that have been given to them by their parents or communities in their home country, yet face so many obstacles to success. This is particularly relevant for one of my subjects, who vividly remembers that both her brother—who went to the U.S before the rest of her family—and her community in Mexico gave her, at a young five years of age, high hopes of life in America. They spoke of “el sueño Americano” (the American Dream) with awe and thus she had preconceived ideas about the U.S before she even arrived.

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<sup>40</sup> My study only consists of students from an elite liberal arts college, thus they only represent the one side of what the Suarez-Orozco’s describe here. Therefore, I can only speak to the children of immigrants who have, in a sense, “made it.”

Sadly, the authors conclude that the longer immigrant youth stay in the United States, the worse their overall physical and psychological health, and “the more ‘Americanized’ they bec[o]me, the more likely they [are] to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency.”<sup>41</sup> This conclusion is overwhelmingly negative and does not account for many of the positive tracks that children of immigrants have taken around the country. My research certainly does not align with this piece, but it must be said that this could be because of the current situational circumstances of my particular subjects. I cannot speak to the millions of other children of immigrants who are in less fortunate circumstances, but I do not think that it is correct to say that the longer the children of immigrants stay in the U.S, the worse off they will be. This view does not present a full picture of the possibilities for success in this group, and treats all children of immigrants the same under one category, when there are clearly a wide spectrum of circumstances as my analysis demonstrates. . This work was “designed to provide an overview of the major themes in the lives of the children of immigrants — the nature of their journey to the United States, their earliest perceptions, and their subsequent transformations.”<sup>42</sup> Like Portes and Rumbaut, the Suarez-Orozcos’ use the experience of five young people to better portray the full picture of the immigrant child’s experience. This work is also all based off of children immigrated *with* their parents, thus does not necessarily apply to several of my subjects who were born in the U.S.

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<sup>41</sup> Suarez-Orozco, Carola and Marcelo. *Children of Immigration*. (Harvard University Press, 2001), page 5

<sup>42</sup> Idib. page 13

Some scholars, like Soonjin S. Oh and North Cooc, focus on the education of immigrant youths to assess their social situation and implications for the nation as a whole. The authors note how particularly potent issues of immigration have become during the economic crisis in which an anti-immigration climate has been fostered in the United States by those who feel immigrants are “stealing jobs.” “The media frenzy and political strife surrounding immigration stem from a dominant discourse that further attempts to identify effective measures to manage those being perceived as a societal burden while capitalizing on this group as an untapped resource for economic development and global competitiveness.”<sup>43</sup> Cultural critic Chandan Reddy mirrors this sentiment in his work *Freedom With Violence*, in which he describes how the United States government effectively manages to increase the number of immigrants coming into the country (by posing as a benevolent actor in the business of reuniting families) when the economy demands low-wage non-citizen labor, yet simultaneously “uses immigration as a vehicle to dismantle its welfare responsibilities.”<sup>44</sup> The United States needs the low-wage labor that many immigrants provide, yet is not willing to provide for them once inside the country. This type of systematic violence is particularly interesting considering that the main contestation regarding immigrants today is that they are “stealing jobs,” in a time of massive unemployment, yet the U.S continues to need their labor to maintain efficient low-wage production and is supporting their migration in many ways. Oh and Cooc stress the importance of the demographic of the children of immigrants “since children of immigrants

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<sup>43</sup> Soonjin S. Oh and North Cooc, “Immigration Youth and Education.” (Harvard Educational Review, 2011), page 1.

<sup>44</sup> Chandan Reddy, *Freedom With Violence: Race, Sexuality and the U.S State*. (Duke University Press, 2011), page 159.

are the fastest growing segment of the U.S population...they will inevitably transform U.S educational and labor landscapes in the coming decades” and a special forum is needed to address their specific needs.<sup>45</sup> They discuss the ways in which macro-level factors such as political climate and state level policies affect the political and social lives and outcomes of the children of immigrants. The authors argue that these children and their families are inextricably tied to race, power, systems of oppression and inequitable distribution of resources and that it is necessary to remember these factors when examining their experience in the education system. They, like many other scholars, use anecdotal immigrant narratives to tell their story and explain the broader context within which their lives are transformed. Oh and Cooc and Reddy are all integral to my research in that they set the scene for contemporary immigration in the U.S. They also are the most comprehensive on the topics of race and systems of oppression, which eventually became the focus of my study.

Many scholars differ in opinion in the field of American Dream studies. The more contemporary scholars seem to question and challenge the Dream, finding it more suspicious and pointing to its failure for a large portion of Americans in practical terms, whereas the older historians and sociologists believe in its tenets and practicality much more firmly. The field of immigration studies and children in immigration is much harder to characterize, as each scholar takes on a different aspect of the field. Yet the ones who focus on the children of immigrants can generally be split into the factions of assimilationists and anti-assimilationists, and also those who view the state of this

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<sup>45</sup> Soojin S. Oh and North Cooc, “Immigration Youth and Education.” (Harvard Educational Review: 2011), page 1.

demographic in a positive or negative light. Differing opinions aside, the conclusion in that field is that this is an extremely important demographic for the future of the United States and the way it which it develops is thus highly important. Although the existing scholarship of these fields is vast, it lacks an investigation of first-generation American citizens as a case study at a small liberal arts institution like Colby College. There is a lack of research on the state of these students at this type of institution and it is within this niche that I will begin my study of first-generation American citizens and their conception of the American Dream.

## **Methodology**

The research for this study was executed through the combination of a survey of twenty-two questions taken online and an interview consisting of nine questions that was administered in person. The online survey was my first engagement with my subjects in which I asked them a range of questions, all of which could be answered in a few words or short sentences (see appendix A). This initial interaction was meant to establish the subject's background and history before administering the in person interview, which would be composed of longer, more intensive questions. The survey asked basic questions such as the subjects' name, age, current residence outside of Colby College, financial situation, language preferences, parents' level of education and occupation, race, conceptions of nationality, current aspirations, whether they and their parents consider themselves American and a brief history of parents' immigration process. Ultimately, students' responses to the survey questions about their parents' occupations, education and income gave me a basic background of their circumstances, yet none of the information

from this section was particularly useful in terms of understanding their relationship to the American Dream. In other words, little of interest was noted in respondents' answers to these questions.

The narrative style interview questions that were administered in person produced a wealth of interesting information. I will analyze two of the major themes that I found, as well as several other smaller yet profound findings in the results and analysis section. The questions administered in the interview are as follows:

1. Have you ever heard of the American Dream?
2. What is your personal definition of the American Dream?
3. Where did you learn that definition?
4. Do you think that your parents share your definition?
5. How does this concept affect you personally?
6. Do you believe that the same opportunities are afforded to you as second, third and fourth generation Americans?
7. Do you see other people relating to the American Dream differently?
8. Do you think that your family background /origin has affected opportunities afforded to you? If so, in what ways?
9. What are your personal aspirations after Colby?

A comparative analysis the subject's responses follow.

## **Results and Analysis**

All of the subjects in this study are current Colby College students, ranging in age from 18 to 21. Each subject has either one or both parent/s that immigrated to the United States. All subjects are first generation U.S citizens, although some of their parents have gained citizenship over their time in the U.S. Half of the students were born in the United States, while half came as young children. They hail from all over the country, including California, New York City, Maryland, Connecticut and New Hampshire, and their parents

native countries include the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Germany, Australia, Mexico and China.<sup>46</sup> Although each of their stories is radically different, some interestingly common themes can be seen throughout the interview process. I focus on two major themes here, first on a seemingly strong disassociation with the American Dream and then an analysis of race as a stronger identity marker than immigration status.

### **Disassociation of the American Dream: Two-Definition Theory**

From the outset of the interviews, it becomes clear that the subjects express a strong desire to disassociate with the concept of the American Dream. When asked about the American Dream and their personal definition of it (question 2), many subjects stated two definitions, making it clear that they believed their personal definition was radically different than the definition taught to them through either educational means or through American popular culture. First, each posed what one subject called a “prototypical definition,” which consisted of traditional 1950’s ideals of “a white picket fence, dog, middle-class” and “a nuclear family” as expressed by several subjects. Subjects implied that this definition was “outdated.”

Each subject then provided his or her personal definition of the American Dream following the traditional one. Each subject’s own definition provided some very interesting information in terms of his or her relationship to the American Dream. Half of the subjects

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<sup>46</sup> Much of what lead me to these particular students was word of mouth—I only knew two of them personally before the study, but was informed of the others by Professor Dr. Bradley of Colby College. They were not chosen based on country of origin of their parents, but a wide range is presented by chance.



provided definitions that they believed were strikingly different from the traditional definition they provided, but actually ended up restating that definition in his or her own terms. For example, three of the subjects appeared to be—one even admitted that she was—“pessimistic” about the functionality and existence of the American Dream, yet when asked what his or her personal American Dream was, used words like “comfortable,” “financial and academic success,” “family,” and “stability.” All of these words have strong ties to what is considered the “traditional” American Dream narrative and definition, yet are reframed by these subjects in a way that feels appropriate to their particular circumstances. In essence, then, the subjects believe in their own version of American Dream, yet one that is strikingly similar to the traditional version while denying being similar at all. This is understandable, but it is interesting to see the ways in which the subjects express how different they think they are from this narrative, when in reality, they are reproducing some of the very same words of James Truslow Adams in 1931. So then, what makes these subjects feel such a strong inclination to make it clear that they do not participate in the classic American Dream narrative, when the definition they give for their personal aspiration mimics it almost unwaveringly?

The first Subject to be interviewed was a young man named Kalen<sup>47</sup>, who started this trend by clearly separating what he believes is the conventional definition and his own definition. He differentiated the two by emphasizing the “my” before giving his personal American Dream. The traditional definition he describes includes descriptors such as, “suburbs, white picket fence, dog, middle-class and leisure.” When speaking of *his* American

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<sup>47</sup> All names in this work were changed for the protection of the subjects of this study

Dream however, he describes wanting to live comfortably, “with a substantial amount of money [and]...can’t be around poverty that is higher than normal.” His definition, although he sees it as different, is actually just a recreation of the first one he describes. For instance, suburbanization represented the economic ability of the middle-class to leave poverty ridden urban areas and live “comfortably” (to use his word), in extra-urban neighborhoods. He wishes not to associate with the traditional aspects, but in a way restates them as his own desires. Finally, when asked how this concept affects him personally, he says that it helps him to “stay motivated” in reaching his goals of educational and economic success. This is arguably the goal of the American Dream and thus he is a prime example of its power and success.

This disassociation with the American Dream is seen several times throughout the interviews. For example, a subject named Karina, while describing the American Dream, stated, “there is no such thing as the American Dream,” noting that immigrants from her parents’ home country of Mexico came to the United States expecting the promises offered by the traditional definition, but experienced “a completely different thing.” She shares that her mother, who worked in the tobacco fields when she first migrated to California, experienced the harsh realities of the myth of the American Dream. However, when answering question 5, “how does this concept affect you personally?” she answered, “*my* American Dream was to go to college and help bring my family up in term of economic class.” Knowing that educational aspirations are an essential part of the original narrative, it is interesting to hear her reiterate this same idea while believing it to be a different dream all together, one that belongs to her and not the “classic” American. Since she saw first hand what her mother experienced, it is clear that she does not want to connect

herself to an idea or a narrative that her mother suffered from by believing in. Yet she still wants what the dream supposedly has to offer in terms of finances and an education. Thus in order to state her goals, she must reframe them and make sure that she herself does not directly align with the American Dream by maintaining that her desires are different.

Similarly, a subject named Barbara displayed a disavowal of participation in the concept of the American Dream, noting that she has “just completely dismissed the idea of the American Dream.” She admits that her experiences and education have given her a pessimistic outlook on the concept and the mere mentioning of it seems to evoke strong emotions in her. “Its displayed like something everyone can achieve but in reality its not,” she conveys. This clearly shows her dissatisfaction with the American Dream and what she believes are false promises implicit in it. When asked about how the concept affects her personally, she alludes to pieces of her education that point to the concept’s falsity. For example, she once went to a summer program in which the participants read *Reluctant Fundamentalist* and she learned the idea that meritocracy does not exist in the U.S, though some claim that it does. Yet shortly after, once transitioned to talking about her parents, she admits: “It drives me...my parent’s definition drives me.” This subject is admittedly pessimistic towards the functionality of the dream, yet its underlying implications motivate and drive her. It is interesting to see they ways in which her education has shaped her perception of the American Dream as a negative force, yet once on the topic of her parents, her attitude changes and she says that it drives her. Like many of the subjects seem to demonstrate, it is possible that Barbara sees that achieving the American Dream isn’t possible for many, but it is for her. The idea of these subjects as the “exception” and not the “rule” will be analyzed further in the discussion on luck later in this piece.

One subject named Catherine considers the traditional American Dream stereotypes as a “thing of the past.” She learned about the American Dream in eighth grade history class, as they spent a significant amount of time on the 1950’s as a decade. “I think of [the American Dream] as something that used to be a really big deal—the phrase,” she notes, but these ideas that shape her conception of the traditional American Dream mean nothing to her now. However, she believes that “the idea is still very much alive, but we don’t call it the American Dream, we just refer to it as being successful. I don’t know how American it still is.” This is a great conceptual realization and hits at the core of this finding: “American” as an identity marker is fading and does not hold the resonance that it once did, as I will soon show with the subjects’ comparison to their parents’ conceptions of American-ness. Catherine’s definition of the American Dream “doesn’t have much to do with America”; she sees her goals as inherently dislocated from American narratives of success. This could be, she admits, because she has lived in the U.S her whole life and does not feel pressure to succeed that immigrants who moved here might feel. I argue that this demonstrates a fading nationalism or connection to American cultural markers that the Dream intrinsically demonstrates. For example, as the Dream tends to evoke strong cultural markers of American identity, the fact that she does not link them together shows her diminished affinity for identifying as American. Since the dream is part of a larger project of American nationalism, this dislocation is a sign of discontent and desire to distance oneself from what it means to be “American” today.

There is a common thread of a disavowal of participation in a system that many of these subjects view as corrupt or unjust in some way. These ambiguities about patriotism are easily sensed from the outset. This is particularly true with the subjects of color.

Although the racial aspect of this research will be discussed in depth in the next section, it is important to note the differences in their relationships the American Dream in terms of race. Chiefly, the two white subjects did not display the same sort of emotion, ambivalence and disassociation that the subjects of color did. In fact, both of these interviews contained little backlash at all. That is why these subjects' accounts were omitted from this section, except to note their lack of dissonance, which is very telling in and of itself. It shows that they either feel as if they have been afforded the promises of the American Dream or simply feel no reason to disavow it. This is mirrored in the fact that both of them feel that they are afforded the same opportunities as second, third and fourth generation Americans, in response to question 6.

There are many possible reasons for this seeming paradox in the individual self-perceptions constructed by the subjects of color. This difference in race could be attributed to the United States' historical adherence to a form of American nationalism that is inherently an adherence to certain constructions of whiteness. In essence, the U.S is a nation putatively white. Our history points to the dangers of this construction of white as "normal" for the nation's people of color. The post-war version of America that these subjects allude to time and time again (and which continues to circulate in some contemporary ways), seems highly antithetical and anachronistic to these subjects. Since they link the American Dream to the definition, and ideal, created during this time period, the concept and its historical connotation are particularly obsolete to this group in terms of current ideals of multiculturalism and diversity. Charles Taylor in *Multiculturalism*, describes multiculturalism as a "demand for recognition" of all identities in contemporary

American politics and culture.<sup>48</sup> Following Taylor, I would broadly describe the behaviors displayed in the responses by the students of color as representative of “multiculturalism.” This notion of multiculturalism as it compares to the American Dream will be interrogated further on in this piece.

These subjects’ responses of disassociation point to notions of racial alterity that are tangible in these interviews with subjects of color: they simply cannot, or do not want to, associate with a concept that is connected to a time where whiteness was “American.” This could be why Catherine, a Chinese-American, no longer thinks of the conceptions of success or things she does as “American,” because to do so would imply an inherent whiteness that she herself does not possess. Or why Karina believes that the American Dream is about “belonging. In a way it’s like being white.” Even if they did not feel personally disadvantaged by the system (in fact many of them feel advantaged due to their ability to identify with certain identities which will be discussed in the conversation on multiculturalism) they still did not want to associate themselves with the American Dream because they could see what many of them believed to be false promises undelivered to other people. For example, Catherine noted that the U.S government has never negatively affected her, never “cheated” her, yet she sees how others may feel more anger toward an America, and thus transitively the American Dream, that has “cheated” them in some way. Their disassociation suggests that they feel as though to be “American” is to be white, and that this national identity formation continues to function in this way. It should be noted that white people could too disassociate from this narrative, recognizing how it has

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<sup>48</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism*. (Princeton University Press: 1994), page 25.

affected people of color. Yet in my analysis, this was not evident with the white subjects, demonstrating how this concept does not seem to influence or affect them as much as it did the subjects of color.

It is as if this group is viewing the American Dream from a reserved space in which they are able to critique it. Their parents went through the immigration process, although in varying degrees, and they have lived as people of color in the U.S, thus they are somewhat structurally knowing and suspicious of the Dream's function. Some feel more knowledgeable than their parents in some respect. For example, Katrina describes her father's naiveté and "almost innocent view of what it is to be here" while she stands more structurally knowing and thus able to critique. Barbara too seems to feel as if her lived experience has made her more knowing than both of her parents and others who are not as educated on the functioning of the American Dream. This is one reason that this demographic is so fascinating: their position in society as straddling two cultures actually ends up making them somewhat more structurally knowing on both sides of the spectrum (that of Americans born in the U.S. and that of immigrants coming into the U.S). In other words, they have grown up here while their parents have not, so it is assumed that they know more about the intricacies of American culture. However, since their parents went through the immigration process in search of their own American Dreams, this group also knows about the structural inequalities and the dangers that come along with it. Therefore, I argue that this group is indeed significantly culturally literate.

### **The Function of "Luck"**

Even though their parents have essentially achieved some version of the American Dream, by virtue of the subject being at this distinguished institution in the first place, the subjects critique the concept and attribute their parents' success to a mixture of hard work and luck. This reliance on luck as a driver of success was an interesting theme weaving the subjects' interviews together. Almost all of the subjects admit that he or she and his or her parents were "lucky" in getting to where they are now. This reliance on luck shows that these children of immigrants believe that this dream does not work for everyone equally, as it is promised. Many of them see their parents' success as based on lucky circumstances. For example, Kalen discussed his great-uncles' experience and presence in the U.S preceding his parents' emigration from Grenada and attributed their success to him. This family member taught them proper ways to handle taxes, told them what neighborhood to live in and introduced them to a network in their new city of Brooklyn, New York. He makes sure to be clear that he sees himself and his family as exceptional cases, admitting that he believed he may be "kind of skewed" because his family did very well for themselves when they arrived in the U.S. Furthermore, he states, the fact that they "did very well for themselves versus other families, its really just based off luck." He believes that had his granduncle not been in the U.S to help his parents adjust, "it would have been a much rougher time."

When speaking of his own opportunities, Kalen sees his prospects for success to be saturated with luck as well. Programs and opportunities "came up at the right time" at his public school in Brooklyn; including open spots in a program called Legal Outreach that offered constitutional law debates and Saturday writing classes for inner-city public high school students. These programs helped kick start his higher education desires, being



especially important to him because he is the first person in his family to go to college. Being in contact with these programs and opportunities, however, does not necessarily have anything to do with “luck.” The implementation of programs and scholarships to inner-city schools is a project set in place to combat forms of systematic racism and classism, in order to help disadvantaged students. It is not simply “luck” that got him those opportunities. The fact that “luck” is not the force working in this instance shows that he believes he is the exception and not the rule in instances of success.

One subject named Isabel grants that “everyone starts from a different platform” when it comes to viewing the American Dream and success in the United States. She can see that opportunity is “much more of a struggle for other people” than it currently is for her. In response to question 7, she notes, “I see myself as a lot luckier than [my parents] because they took this major step for me, I don’t think I would have had as many opportunities as I see myself having here as in Mexico.” In response to question 4 of how this concept affects her personally, Isabel notes that she has been “lucky enough” to see the successful side of the American Dream and she appreciates that immensely. Yet she realizes that the American Dream “doesn’t exist for everyone.” Like Catherine, Isabel also sees herself as lucky in that she has not been discriminated against unlike other racial groups in the U.S.

Implicit in these responses is a sort of structural blindness that relies on “luck” instead of acknowledging very tangible ways in which these situations probably unfolded. In essence, “luck” is used to subconsciously deny privilege and circumstance. The reliance on luck implies that these subjects are outside structures of predictability and normativity.

Although they believe in the necessity for hard work, the fact that so many of these subjects believe themselves to be lucky in succeeding in their lives in the U.S thus far is very telling. It demonstrates that they believe they are the *exception* and not the *rule* in terms of success achieved through the American Dream; they exist outside the structure of predictability. They do not believe that the benefits of the American Dream are available to all who work hard, but the way in which they position themselves as separate from the group that fails at the American Dream is extremely important. Their distance works to disassociate their stories of immigration from everything we know about the forces of economy and history on the immigration process. It is a way of absolving oneself any credit, which sounds good, but ultimately disassociates these narratives from overarching structures that can explain why things happen quite clearly *not* in terms of luck.

### **Identity Markers: Racial Dynamics vs. Immigration Status**

Another significant theme arising from this research is the idea that current U.S racial dynamics affect the subject group more than their immigrant status or immigrant history. Contrary to my hypothesis, the majority of the subjects either did not know much about their parent's immigration story, or simply did not care to talk about it extensively. This disclosure is important because it suggests that the immigration narrative that has been understood and documented in both popular knowledge and in the field of immigration studies is no longer as relevant to this generation of the children of immigrants. Their status as the children of immigrants does not define them quite as much as other contemporary markers of identity, primarily, that of race.

However, it must be noted that these responses differed for white subjects and subjects of color. The white subjects seemed to feel the most disengaged from the immigration narrative. For example, one white subject, Gina, whose mother is an immigrant from Australia, acknowledged how she can “appreciate the idea of immigrants” because of the story of her single grandmother who worked extremely hard to bring her daughter (the subject’s mother) and herself to the U.S. She notes that she is more aware (recall structural awareness) of how hard she need needs to work because of this story but she does not believe she has it harder than second, third and fourth generation Americans by any means.

For the other white subject, Nick, the immigration status of his parents seemed only marginally important to his life. The fact that his mother is from Germany did not affect his current opportunities in the U.S—he believes that the same opportunities that are afforded to him now would be afforded to him had he not been an immigrant, with the exception of potential visa issues. When asked how the concept of the American Dream affects him personally, he answered simply that it “doesn’t really.” However, this subject admitted that he could see the immigration story being more important for people emigrating from other countries. He says one’s relationship to the American dream is a “cultural thing, depending on where you’re coming from.” This answer hints at the idea that certain countries garner a certain amount of social capital and make the transition to success, however one might define the term, relatively easier than others. For example, he notes that it was not hard for his family because his dad had a job working for the U.S government, yet mentioned that immigrants from a country such as Mexico presumably have it harder. Although the Mexican border has a degree of infamy in our current social consciousness, the fact that the

subject mentioned a stereotype such as the Mexican immigrant as having a harder transition points to the underlying racial nature of American conceptions of immigration at large. He can recognize his own privilege, but embedded in this is his own disassociation from the immigrant narrative as he steps back to point at another immigrant group and note their disadvantage. It was easier for him, presumably, because he is white and thus does not face the struggles of racial stereotypes as they pertain to certain immigrants specifically. He can “pass” as an American who has been here for centuries, unlike other immigrants of color, who, to some degree, wear their story on their skin.

For the black and Asian-American subjects, race was clearly more salient than the fact that they are the children of immigrants when it came to opportunities for success and their relationship to the American Dream. For example, one of the black subjects, Kalen, whose parents hail from Grenada, was asked if he thinks that his family background/origin has affected opportunities afforded to him. He answered: “I don’t think being Grenadian necessarily affects me, I think its more race based, being black and stuff.” In this way, he expressed that his status as the child of immigrants is not as important as his status as a black person when it comes to opportunities in the U.S. “I mean [being the child of immigrants] definitely plays a part, but not that big of a part” in opportunities for success. This immigration status of his parents is not a major marker of his identity, but his race is. This subject does not seem to identify with his Grenadian nationality to a large extent but felt a stronger connection, or so it seemed, to the black communities that he has been a part of throughout his life.

The other black subject, Barbara, whose parents are from the Dominican Republic, did not explicitly mention race, except for when asked if her family background/origin has affected opportunities afforded to her. She answered that her friends sometimes tell her she “is the best of both worlds” because she is both black and Latina. She then explained that these aspects of her identity have worked to her advantage when it comes to certain opportunities such as scholarships. For example, in the application for one scholarship, the guidelines stated that the applicant had to identify as the same race as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The subject then noted that, “being from the inner city has granted me certain opportunities that I feel like I wouldn’t have had if I weren’t from the inner city or if I wasn’t black or Hispanic.” Here, Barbara, like Kalen previously, is feeling some of the material benefits that are offered now for those who have been systematically disadvantaged. In other words, projects that give opportunities to young people of color in inner cities is a direct link to the disadvantages those in these situations have historically suffered. In an age in which the United States claims to value difference and diversity, the purposeful inclusion of minorities into mainstream educational opportunities makes complete sense. Yet at the same time, it skews our ideas about what how this inclusion is actually functioning. At this juncture, it is important to question the sincerity in the desire for racial equity, and not just simply “diversity.” Do these tactics of inclusion represent our genuine interest in understanding and equalizing racial difference or do they simply provide a superficial answer to burgeoning discontent with the lack of racial equality? This question will resurface shortly in a conversation on multiculturalism and its function in American culture today. It is important to note that Barbara chooses to talk about race rather than the immigration aspect of her identity when she speaks about opportunity.

Although she holds her parent's immigration story in high esteem, when it comes down to it, U.S racial relations are more important to talk about than the fact that she is the child of immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

For the Asian-American subject, Catherine, whose father is from China and whose mother is from the U.S, race also plays a prevalent role throughout the interview. When asked if she thinks that she is afforded the same opportunities as second, third and fourth generation Americans, she answered, "I think it depends more on race than anything to be honest." In a similar fashion to the other subjects of color, race trumps immigration status in her consciousness. Opportunities in the U.S, for this subject, "mostly [have] to do with what race you are and how well you speak English, I think that's what it mostly depends on." Similarly to the Barbara, this subject saw her race as positively influencing the opportunities afforded to her. When asked if she thought her family background/origin has affected opportunities afforded to her, she stated "no, not at all," expressing that she assumed that the question was meant to yield a disadvantage, yet then realized that being part Chinese has actually *helped* her. She notes: "At this point I kind of see it as an advantage for me since there is a push for non-white people. I never feel disadvantaged." This is another form of structural blindness that comes with the "push," as she calls it, for multiculturalism and diversity. It leads her to believe that she is benefiting from this trend, when at its core, the material benefits that she is feeling are actually a different, coded form of racism. This easy answer of "inclusion" works to pacify people of color and those who oppose racial inequality by making it seem as though real change has been enacted, when in reality, the problem has only been dealt with at the surface, and structural inequalities persist. The trend of multiculturalism, push for diversity and issues of race that Catherine is

alluding to, along with other subjects, seem to trump the fact that her parents are immigrants, in fact she even mentions her status as the child of immigrants to be “irrelevant” other than this advantage to “check a box on a form.” This is not to say that she does not appreciate the hard work of her father in immigrating to the U.S, but rather she is acknowledging the fleeting nature of the status of immigrant, at least for their children. Again, in this way, race and issues surrounding race are more salient to this group than immigration status.

The one outlier in terms of the value placed on immigrant status came in interviewing a Mexican-American subject, Katrina, with an extraordinary immigration story. When asked if she thinks the same opportunities are afforded to her as second, third and fourth generation Americans, she responded that she did not believe so. This feeling was not based on her race alone, but rather that the immigration status of her parents and herself have provided her with several obstacles in her search for success in the U.S. For example, she is the first person in her family to attend college, college in the U.S nonetheless, and thus neither she nor her parents knew fundamental things about the college process. She remembers not knowing what to do with a student ID card in terms of meal swipes and other cultural aspects that being an immigrant disallowed.

It is also imperative to note here that this subject came to the United States at the age of 6 years old, and thus spent some of her formative years in her parent’s home country of Mexico. Her immigration story is quite extraordinary, as her mother and father paid extra to get her fake documents in order for her to cross the border successfully. She remembers what she was wearing that day, including that she was told she had to change

clothes, out of her flowery patterned outfit because it appeared “too Mexican.” She was given jean shorts and a Disneyland T-shirt to wear instead. For fear that the border patrol would find out that she and her sister, ages 6 and 15, could not speak English, they were given Robitussin to make them fall asleep and would not have to answer border patrol questions. She remembers waking up to her father meeting them on the other side of the border and driving them to California where she reunited with her mom for the first time in eight months. The vividness with which she remembers this story is breathtaking and clearly influences how she feels about herself in an American context. She feels strongly that there is a difference between her and the average child of immigrants who was born in the United States and grew up here, because she is an immigrant herself. The difference lies in actually experiencing the immigration process, and thus having a different perspective on the struggles that come with being the child of immigration. Although she is now a citizen, traces of her life in secret are clearly still present in her responses. In regard to children of immigrants who have grown up here, she notes that she does not think that they see American life with the same perspective because the U.S is all they have known. “There is such a big privilege of being able to grow up in the United States, like being born here. When I was little, we weren’t supposed to talk about our status as immigrants. My mom would say, ‘if someone asks you, you were born here.’” She doubts that any children of immigrants of who grew up here had to deal with issues as grave as the threat of deportation. This assumption is proven correct in regard to the other subjects of this study; none of them are in danger of deportation and thus their understanding of American life is different than hers. Her circumstances give perspective to the group in recognizing that there is a range of lived experience present in this demographic. Her experience differs



widely from those of the other subjects in this study in that she is not just the child of immigrants she is an immigrant herself.

When asked whether she thinks that her family background/origin has affected opportunities afforded to her, she answers yes, but both positively and negatively. She first responds, “this is problematic to say, but I’m an immigrant, I’m a woman, and I’m Latina. I have a lot of opportunities.” In this way, she notes, like many of the other subjects, being the child of immigrants has benefitted her by qualifying her for specific scholarships and jobs. Because of her minority identity status, she thinks she gets specific opportunities as a way of “balancing things out,” in the current age of multiculturalism. On the flip side, her parents did not have family here before they came and do not work in sectors that would provide her with connections for things such as internships, which she sees a negative consequence of being the child of immigrant parents. She has had to *learn* the process of networking and forming connections, rather than having them intrinsically by virtue of native parents. For her, having been through the immigration process herself, she knows how important networking is to successfully achieve her goals.

Yet still, for Katrina, who has such an incredible migration story to tell, race still serves as a major factor in her American story. To her, the American Dream is about “belonging. In a way it’s like being white. Like having a life that a white person might have.” Although historical narratives of the American Dream were meant to function as the possibility for *all* citizens to improve, and makes no mention of race, it is clear that in reality, this concept is still saturated with the racial tensions that the post-war image conjured. This particular subject, whose immigration story has clearly had a huge impact

on her life, varies widely from the other subjects, some of whom either did not know much about, or did not seem to care much about their parents' status as immigrants. Since she is herself an immigrant and thus feels an affinity to the process itself, the concepts of race and immigration are *both* salient to her current life.

The idea that these subjects would rather talk about racial dynamics than their parents' nationality again, like the fading of the traditional version of the American Dream, points to a fading marker of identity. I argue that nationality no longer functions as it once did as a primary marker of identity. Cultural historian Matthew Frye Jacobson speaks to this idea in his groundbreaking study on constructions of whiteness throughout American history, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. In this piece, Jacobson argues that race does not reside in nature but in the contingencies of politics and power. He demonstrates how in this country of immigrants, race has always been the marker of civic inclusion, citing examples of the 1865 immigration wave in which ethnic minorities were re-racialized as white in order to be accepted as Americans. Most important to this study is Jacobson's analysis of the post war amalgamation of whiteness that took place. For instance, he describes the way in which the Jewish identity was brought into the fold of whiteness when previously it was considered non-white. "The circuit is ineluctable. Race is social value become perception; Jewishness seen is social value naturalized and so enforced."<sup>49</sup> This embrace of the Jewish identity, for reasons linked to modes of production, led to its understanding or perception as white. Jacobson describes a "feverish postwar revision of 'the difference': the reification of humanity's

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Harvard University Press: 1998), page 174

‘grand divisions’ in an effort to expunge where possible its ‘lesser’ divisions.”<sup>50</sup> This amalgamate of whiteness, as those ethnicities that were valued for one reason or another were brought into the fold, worked to expel people of color from modes of prosperity, primarily shown through suburbanization. The responses of these subjects on topics of race suggest that this reification of whiteness persists in contemporary American culture and society, and that with increased racial stratification in the U.S, people continue to align on race lines rather than nationalities. However, race and nationalism cannot be easily physically separated in regard to white citizens. It makes sense then, why the two white subjects felt far more comfortable with the American Dream than the subjects of color: the white subjects no longer harbor the ethnic stereotypes of their ancestors and can fully identify as quite simply “white,” and thus “American,” since race and nationalism go hand-in-hand.

It is important to note that by virtue of being a student at Colby College, a reputable and highly ranked institution, the subjects have already achieved an integral aspect of the American Dream in terms of educational opportunity. Knowing that they have in some sense “made it,” could be the reason that the immigrant aspect of their identity has less relevance to their lives and they are thus able to focus on other issues that afflict them, such as race and socioeconomic class. Had the subjects in this interview not been studying at Colby College, their answers could very well have been different, possibly demonstrating a stronger affiliation with the immigration narrative.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Page 102

## The Myth of Multiculturalism

As aforementioned, it is imperative to question American sincerity when speaking about living in an age that values multiculturalism. Cultural critic Jodi Melamed's *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, argues that after World War II, there was a transition from white supremacy to a formally antiracist liberal capitalist modernity in which racial violence is rampant, yet "works normatively by policing representations of difference."<sup>51</sup> In her chapter on neoliberal multiculturalism, she defines the term as that which "has created new privileged subjects, racializing the beneficiaries of neoliberalism as worthy multicultural citizens and racializing the losers as unworthy and excludable on the basis on monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other historico-cultural deficiencies."<sup>52</sup> This state sanctioned antiracism that became popular post-war, she argues, is not actually any less racist but rather represents a reinvented coded form of racism that fits the new capitalist order. Therefore, when the subjects in this study say that they feel as though they are given more opportunities because of their race or ethnicity, they are feeling some of the intended material benefits from the value placed on multiculturalism, such as increased opportunities via scholarships and checking race boxes on applications. Neoliberal multiculturalism works to value those who can provide capital to the state, yet those who are not valued, such as delinquents and the extremely impoverished, do not get to take part in the benefits of "multiculturalism." Therefore it's not really about celebrating each other's

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<sup>51</sup> Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. (The University of Minnesota Press: 2005), page xxi

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Page xxi

differences, but rather finding the benefit in valuing certain subjects of color and what they can offer to American society. Subjects of color who will go on to produce something of value in American society, for example, will be heralded because of the potential capital gain they provide, not because of society's genuine desire to learn about, or care about, their background. Therefore racism still persists, but in a contemporary and acceptable fashion. This is coded racism, and although the subjects of color that I interview are not necessarily aware of the implicit racism in the opportunities given to them, they are indeed aware that even though there are some material benefits of modern multiculturalism, there is a whole host of material/economic realities on the ground that are ignored when one focuses on culture alone.

Chandan Reddy complicates this idea further in what he calls "positivist multiculturalism," echoing and expanding Melamed in many ways. He highlights the idea that the institutionalization of positivist multiculturalism into the modern university functions "as both an ideological apparatus for the state...and as the representative apparatus for the production of legitimate knowledge."<sup>53</sup> Reddy critiques the way in which diversity is synonymous with racial equality in this contemporary moment. He uses Melamed and her idea that neoliberal multiculturalism "sutures official antiracism to state policy in a manner that prevent the calling into question of global capitalism."<sup>54</sup> This is how the state uses the idea of multiculturalism and diversity as a way to divert attention away from its more hidden racist politics. As he continues,

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<sup>53</sup> Chandan Reddy, *Freedom With Violence: Race, Sexuality and the U.S State*, (Duke University Press: 2011), page 140.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Page 141

In this sense the nation—as the name for founding egalitarian conditions, figured variously as a constitutional or contractual community, a historical ethos or spirit, or a shared cultural tradition and ethnicity—is the source for the development of the state as a modern apparatus of liberal progress and social equality. We can take the values of equality and tolerance that articulate hate crimes legislation as one expression of the liberal egalitarianism, one that easily converts, into an alibi for US globalism.<sup>55</sup>

The US citizen thus becomes, especially the liberal multicultural subject (i.e the subjects of color in this research) is in fact a racial figure on the global scene. The very words that we in America revere as positive such as “democracy,” “citizenship,” “civil sovereignty,” and “rights,” according to Reddy, have all become the very terms by which the liberal and now the neoliberal representative state legitimates imperialism and racial exploitation as a social good.<sup>56</sup>

In this sense, current ideas of multiculturalism actually act as an alibi for both the United States government and American citizens: the story we currently tell ourselves about ourselves is that as Americans, we value racial equality when in fact what we value is empirical proof of diversity. We value the increased number of people of color integrated into more elite institutions, political office and the business world. Yet we value this because we think that in some inherent way, sharing space with people of color implies an understanding of lived experience, or that their mere presence in these institutions and sectors implies racial equality. In regard to my study, the institution of Colby College acts as an actor of multiculturalism in precisely this way: with greater value placed on multiculturalism and difference, the school attempts to battle systematic racism and classism by recruiting and accepting more students of color to the school. As shown by

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Page 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Page 155.

their responses, the subjects express that they believe that this is one of the positive effects of a trend towards diversity. This shows how the idea of multiculturalism is seen as progressive to many people in that it at a base level, it promotes the recognition of difference of identity in our society and indicts a history of individualism. Yet although it voices a critique of racial inequality, politics of multiculturalism simply end up reproducing that same inequality, but in coded forms. It attempts to superficially level the playing field of opportunity and understanding without an underlying indictment of historical systems of oppression and power that have led to the inequality in the first place. This is almost more evil in that Americans are convinced that we understand race better through self-celebratory practices of admitting more students of color to elite colleges and by electing a black President, when in reality we do not understand racial difference or have any more true racial equality than we did before the trend of multiculturalism started.

### **The American Dream Outside of America**

Some of the subjects spoke to how the American Dream functions outside of the U.S and how that has affected their personal experience with the concept. This is important for understanding the circulation of the concept to first and foremost help explain their parents' immigration and then help them conceptualize their personal status as the children of immigrants. For example, Kalen mentioned that his parents do not want the classic American Dream and admit that they do not love living in America. They see "a grim future for the country" and have mentioned going back to Grenada, but they will live here out of necessity if it is better for their children. He notes, however, that he would not want

to move to Grenada because one cannot make as much money living there and they potentially could in the U.S. This statement aligns him as a neoliberal multicultural subject, as he is the “new privileged subject” that has been racialized as the beneficiary of American capitalism. That he measures fulfillment of the American Dream in terms of economic success and security demonstrates how he has played this role of the contemporary neoliberal subject perfectly—somewhat of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century, multiracial Ragged Dick.<sup>57</sup>

Barbara talks about how in other countries, including, although not limited to her parents home country of the Dominican Republic, people think that everyone living in America has struck it big. She describes this as follows:

In the DR they always assume that everyone here is rich... its displayed that way to other countries to get immigrants to come, or not even gets displayed but that story gets told over and over again by immigrants themselves to make people think they are fine in the US. People go back to their home country rocking all these clothes and jewelry when that's not how they live here. It's displayed like something everyone can achieve when in reality it's not.

She gives insight into immigrants who “go back and they act like they are dripping in gold and then they come back and are living in the shittiest apartments in the Bronx.” This false sense of wealth serves to validate the immigrant’s decision to leave their home country. In this way, the American Dream is kept alive outside of the U.S, even when it is not actually achieved in the financial sense, as explained by her example of living situations. She has observed this theme in several cultures, noting that her former boyfriend from Nigeria said the same thing about immigrants coming back to his home country. Similarly to Kalen’s

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<sup>57</sup> Professor Ben Lisle of Colby College proposed the formulation that this subject acts as a “21st Century racialized Ragged Dick” in personal correspondence.



parents, Barbara's' parents talk about the house they have built in the Dominican Republic to return to once their children have "made it."

Katrina remembers learning about the American Dream in her home country of Mexico. Her definition, as stated earlier, is the one she learned there as a young girl. Her older brother traveled back and forth from the U.S when she was young and she attributes her definition of the American Dream to him and her community's perspective on his achievements. When people in her community asked about where her brother was and she answered America, they would respond with a sense of awe and would say "ah, buscando por el sueño Americano" as she remembers said to her in Spanish, or "ah, he is searching for the American Dream," implying a sense of admiration. Thus it can be inferred that before she came to the U.S, she had only heard the positive aspects of life in the United States. Although she later experiences a different reality, it is important to note what immigrants think about the United States before they actually arrive, thus explaining how the American Dream continues to function outside U.S borders. She believes, however, that as time goes on and more and more Mexicans do not achieve this dream, people at home in Mexico are becoming slightly "less mystified" with the promises of the concept. Still, people continue to hope for the best and keep coming.

## **Conclusion**

This project, though telling in many respects, is highly limited due to the number of case studies. It was also conducted at a small liberal arts college in rural Maine, producing a particular subject group, although surprisingly diverse in regard to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Thus, in order to further this project and get a better

understanding of how more or different children of immigrants relate to the American Dream, opportunities for success and race more broadly, one could expand to other populations outside of this small-scale assembly. Also, as noted previously, their admission and presence at a distinguished institution such as Colby College suggests that they have “made it” in some respects and have fulfilled a main tenet of the American Dream: educational success. That being said, their relative success in life thus far has allotted them a certain sense of security that allows them to focus on other contemporary social issues that affect them personally, immigration status falling behind race and socioeconomic status in this regard for most subjects. However, for children of immigrants who have maybe not succeeded in this same regard, the focus of topics could very well be different. For instance, because these subjects have “made it” in certain ways, they have the ability to think about things other than how the immigration status of their family affects their current life.

If the interviews conducted had been more open ended, research could look into probing the subjects more on topics that interest them most. For example, if this had been a study that allowed for more back and forth conversation throughout the interviews, the subjects could have been prodded on their opinions about race relations in the United States, highlighting more issues other than the fact that race simply matters to them more than being the children of immigrants. Had this conception been known before the interview, rather than been a product of it, this would have been a possible avenue of interrogation.

An interesting continuation of this project would consist of a larger interview pool including second, third and fourth generation Americans. Since most Americans are immigrants at some capacity, it would be extremely interesting to see the ways in which the American Dream functions at each generational level. For example, how does the perspective of a first-generation American citizen differ from that of a descendent of an ancestor who arrived in America on the Mayflower? In our contemporary moment, are these subjects really that different? What do their similarities/differences say about the current political, economic and social fabric of the United States? On a larger scale, interviewing subjects who do not attend a prestigious institution such as the one I have chosen to work within would also be an interesting continuation of the project. This scenario, I hypothesize, would yield a different set of results. For example, if children of immigrants who are not pursuing higher education were interviewed, what would their definition of the American Dream look like? Would their definitions have any resonance to subjects in this research, or does circumstance change their perception completely?

I suggest that there is a need for a new way to talk about the field of the children of immigrants. The way it is studied now is outdated in regard to the current needs and wants of parts of this population. Although studies on assimilation and the struggles for the children of immigrants to straddle two cultures is still somewhat relevant, it is simply not what this subject group was interested in talking about. This indicates that this part of their identity is maybe not as important as it once was. This project has something important to say about the resonance of this identity formation, or expected formation for that matter. In some ways, according to the specific demographic that I worked with, I am suggesting that although this population is extremely important in that they are the fastest growing

segment of the U.S currently, the fact that they are the children of immigrants may not be that important. They themselves are important, but this particular part of their identity may not be. In the end, this construction may in fact be far less significant in the self-construction of identity and ambition than constructions of racial identity.

The American Dream, as a symbolic tool, is an incredibly effective way of shoring up American identity. Although it is framed as an individual approach to success, the concept functions at a national level in terms of constituting a people. Those who are able to achieve the dream are allowed the title of “American,” while those who do not are not granted full benefits of citizenship, and faulted for supposedly not working hard enough. I argue that the American Dream is still important to study in that even though these subjects disavow it, the concept ultimately operates for them in terms of motivation. I conclude with the formulation that the multiculturalism narrative that is prevalent in contemporary U.S politics and culture is an updated and coded reinvention of the American Dream. It reproduces the kind of shared understanding of equal opportunity inherent in the dream, yet continues to pacify and lie to its subjects in order to shore up a national identity in terms of race on perceived multicultural lines, constitute a people, and ensure the power and control of the nation state.

## Appendix

### A. Survey Interview Questions

1. What is your name?
2. What is your class year?
3. Where is your current place of residence outside of Colby?
4. What year did your parent/s come to the United States?
5. Have they ever told you the reason that they decided to migrate? If so, what is that reason?
6. What is your mother's occupation?
7. What is her highest level of education?
8. Does she identify herself as an American?
9. What is your father's occupation?
10. What is his highest level of education?
11. Does he identify himself as an American?
12. What would you say your family's economic situation is (Wealthy, Upper-middle class, Lower-middle class, Working-class, Poor)?
13. How long have you lived in the United States?
14. Do people in your home speak a language other than English? If so, what language is that?
15. When you speak to your parents, what language do you most often use?
16. What language do you prefer to speak?
17. Do you identify as American or as a mixture of nationalities (i.e. African-American, Cuban-American, etc.)?
18. What does the term "nationality" mean to you/ how would you define that term?
19. What race do you consider yourself?
20. Do you have a paying job at present? If so, please describe.
21. What job would you like to have after graduating from Colby?
22. Realistically speaking, how certain are you of getting this job as an adult?

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