

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Rachael Heemstra

INCITE

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Rachael Heemstra conducted by Whitney Dow on October 1st, 2017. This interview is part of the Study on White People.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Session #1 (video)

Interviewee: Rachael Heemstra

Location: Battle Creek, MI

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: October 1st, 2017

Q: First of all, can you tell me your name, where you live, what you do, and a little about yourself?

Rachael: [02:43:31] My name is Rachael Heemstra. I'm a graduate of Aquinas College in 2015. I'm a manager at Barnes and Noble Starbucks, and I'm twenty-six years old. I've lived in Battle Creek [Michigan] for almost four years now.

Q: Tell me now, are you from Battle Creek? Where are you from originally, and can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and what it was like where you grew up?

[Interruption]

Rachael: [02:43:43] So I originally was born in Holland [Michigan], actually Hamilton [Michigan]. It's just a little country town right outside of Holland, Michigan, and I stayed there until I was seventeen, and then when I graduated I moved to Grand Rapids, and that is where I stayed for almost seven years. And then I moved to Battle Creek after that in 2013—the end of 2013. Growing up in Holland, it's a predominantly Republican, conservative town as most people would say. There's a joke that says there's a church and a pub on every corner. The difference being is the representation of our town is slightly skewed because we have about 40

percent Mexican immigrant population. So although we say according to the ballots it is predominantly conservative, Republican, right-wing, there is a vast majority of people who are ineligible to vote in that reform so we don't hear their opinions.

Q: That's interesting, because most of the people we've talked to who are from rural Michigan, they're from predominantly white towns even though—and to be in a town with such a big population of Latinos, how did that shape your view of yourself, your own race, and the world?

Rachael: [02:44:21] Growing up in a place where there is a significant amount of non-white people, I found that for me I became extremely grateful for the things that I have. I know that what I have is a lot to do with the race that I am. I know that I'm a female, but since 1920, 1950 that's not as big of an issue, although there still are issues with that today. Being white though has helped me in so many ways. I am actually Hispanic, but because my skin color predominantly shows that I'm white, I am not discriminated against in that way. I have found that the neighborhoods that I live in versus which they lived in, the education that was available to me were skewed in some ways, and the opportunities I had offered to me were far more significant.

I went to school in an inner city elementary school where 75 percent of my class was Hispanic, and you'd say 50 percent of those were DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] children, who ironically now are endangered and in fear for their lives living here which is really interesting. So we grew up given the same education, the same classroom, yet now here we are twenty years later, and they have to fear for their lives being uprooted, and I still get to live my life here.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your family life? Your mother and father? What they were like? Your brothers and sisters? What your household was like?

Rachael: [02:45:03] Growing up, I had a single mother. My biological father left when I was one-and-a-half, and my mother kicked him out. He was a very abusive, alcoholic, schizophrenic, bipolar type 1, OCD. And she, I watched her work three jobs, raise me, and do it all on her own until she met who I consider my dad now. And when I was sixteen, they had my brother after many infertility treatments and things like that. So he's a great blessing to our family. He's now eleven.

But growing up, it was, my mother did not shelter me from the world as much as parents do because of the experiences I was exposed to with my biological father up until the age of twelve. I guess you could say I was exposed to more traumatic events, and I grasped a greater sense of what you could truly be grateful for and that things could always be worse. People commonly in life use excuses as to why they cannot go up the ladder or gain anything from their life experiences which I find inadequate because I have overcome what I have, and I will never use it as an excuse as to why I can't further myself in life.

Q: Now is your mother Latino? Your father Latino? What's your—

Rachael: Heritage.

Q: —racial heritage. Yeah.

Rachael: [02:45:46] So this is Heinz 57, is generally what we call it around here. My biological father was Irish, Scottish, Jew, and my mother comes from Hispanic, Polish, German, French, Friese, and I'm forgetting one. [laughs] Just a broad range. Basically European descent. So the Hispanic part is Spain. My great-great-grandpa and my great-great-grandma were born—one was born in France, and one was born in Spain, and it was extremely controversial during the time for them to be together so they both moved to Friese.

Q: So when you say that you're Hispanic, how do you think about yourself? And you say you're white. How do you think of the hierarchy of your identity? What do you think is the important parts—the most important parts and how do you value them and how do you connect them to the world?

Rachael: Sorry, what do you mean?

Q: Talk to me more about the hierarchy of your identity, like which parts of you you feel really connected to because when you sat down the first thing you said you said you were Hispanic, and then you talked about being Heinz 57 so clearly the Hispanic piece is important to you, and I'm wondering—how does your identity as a woman, as a Latino, as Irish, Scotch, Jewish, how do you rank those pieces as important?

Rachael: [02:46:25] So having several different backgrounds all incorporated into one for me, I never identify myself as a Latina female personally because Spain is Europe, and it's European

to me. I did pass a fluency test in order to graduate in high school. My mother always spoke Spanish to me growing up. It's something that's always been a part of my culture in that way so being bilingual in that language that's where that connection comes from. I am not in touch with any history of my Irish, Scottish background due to that being from a biological father I don't know much about that heritage. I guess things that I didn't realize growing up that was incorporated by my ethnicity and my race would be food, just the holidays, things that you don't really think about that normal people don't eat latkes every day.

Or in Friesse, for breakfast it's bread that's like this thick and then a layer of cream, which butter, and then there's these chocolate sprinkles, and that's just a normal thing whereas that's not really seen in American culture. Growing up getting that, you just think that's normal, a special breakfast. So I've always identified myself when I checkout anything on any survey, any job application, any education, I have always put white, non-Hispanic. It's not a big percentage of me, and yes, it is a part of me, and I like to exemplify that by speaking Spanish, and by giving back to those communities as much as I can. I spent time, I spent several summers in Honduras working with underprivileged children and helping build their schools and teaching them English.

Q: And you think that was somehow activated by growing up in a mixed community that you started to see yourself reflected in those other people, or is it more just about your own personal culture?

Rachael: [02:47:20] I grew up with my mother was my primary influence in my life, and she has always taught me everyone is equal, and she works in three different churches. She's a part of

several different organizations, the ACLU to LGBTQ rights activist. I mean she has always been my role model. When she works in inner city schools, I follow her sometimes and work with her and the students, and that's really what got me going with seeing everyone around me and growing up not just in a predominantly white neighborhood. I grew up around everything.

I grew up from—I won't release a name—but I grew up across the street from the enforcer of a local gang. That is a big deal. That is a significant piece of history as far as gangs and weapons and drugs in America go. That's the neighborhood that I lived in, but I always felt safe. I never felt like I was in any danger and recognizing that my upbringing and the diversity that I was exposed to helped shape how I view the world. Even now to this day, I live in a neighborhood where it is not predominantly white, and I like that. I don't want to live somewhere where there isn't diversity shown. That's something that I'd like to pass onto my son.

Q: Why don't you want in a monolithic neighborhood, or why do you want to live in a diverse neighborhood?

Rachael: [02:47:59] For me I think of a predominantly white neighborhood as a cookie cutter type of lifestyle. It keeps one view. It keeps you very sheltered in what you could have in life. I think it's very important to understand that the different cultures, the different belief systems that are in our nation—we should not be a melting pot. We're supposed to be a salad bowl. We are America. We were founded on people moving here who were technically immigrants. Europeans came here. That's immigration right there. That's first and foremost. So us welcoming in other cultures and accepting those as a whole, that broadens our view of the world, it keeps us from

being narrow minded, and it opens up endless opportunities for our country or the communities just in this town to develop together.

Q: What motivated you to get involved in this project?

Rachael: [02:48:26] I have a great love for books, and I happened to talk into the bookstore downtown Battle Creek looking for a specific book, and the owner started speaking to me, and I just was having a general conversation with him, and then Sam heard me. He was sitting in the back of the store, and the owner called him up and said, “You have to meet this girl. She’s got so many opinions. [laughs] You have to meet her for your project,” and I was like, “What’s your project?”

We just talked for about fifteen to twenty minutes, and he sat down with me and explained what he was doing. I was like that’s awesome. When I was at Aquinas, I studied sociology. I took just under forty credits of sociology and psychology. It’s something I was very intrigued about. I did not pick it as my major. I have a fond love for art history and art, but I did keep that as a primary part of my education. So I was really intrigued about what he was trying to do.

Q: And what are you hoping to get out of your participation in the project?

Rachael: [02:48:52] Nothing for myself really. I’m not trying to get anything out of the project for myself personally. I have been in school, and I remember doing research projects. I remember how difficult it was to find volunteers or anyone who would adequately give you any

kind of answers beyond yes or no or very just short, brief descriptions. So I sympathize with that, and I also find the project itself extremely intriguing, and I'm very interested in seeing the results and seeing other people. I cannot wait to see what's going to come of it.

Q: So essentially you're a ringer?

Rachael: [02:49:07] Yes. [laughs] I'm one of those who—people send me surveys a lot. I still have a lot of friends who are in college or grad school, and they're like, "Can you take this for me?" "Can you take surveys for me?" I'm like, "Yes, yes, I'll do that for you," because they know that I'm an open book. You ask me anything about my life I'm going to tell you. You may not like the answer. You may not like how dark my history is. You may not like my political beliefs, but my boss always says to me—she says, "I love you because you're face value." So if that's what I am, that's what I will offer the world.

Q: When you say you have a dark history, what do you mean by that?

Rachael: [02:49:19] Growing up since about the age—my first memory in life starts when I was about one-and-a-half, and my history—my mother divorced my biological dad when she found out she was pregnant. Because he would beat her senseless, he would threaten to kill her, and when he left, he would show up with a shotgun and threaten to kill us both. He kidnapped me when I was three years old. From the time I was probably one-and-a-half to two years old, I was sexually, physically, and mentally abused in my life, and it followed me until I was—when I was fifteen, I had my first serious boyfriend.

He was twenty years old, and he continuously sexually, physically, mentally abused me, and you can read the psychology lines between that point A and point B in that, and I was almost nineteen when I told myself that I needed to stop and think and break away from that chain and that lifestyle and not to end up like the past five generations of women. The past five generations of women in my family have not all been abused, but they all did get married between the ages of sixteen and nineteen and then had children immediately after, and I was determined not to be a part of that cycle.

It was a very difficult time for me to completely grasp—you know at that age, even at nineteen, your brain is not fully developed to completely understand what is happening to you, why it's happening to you, and what you can do to change your circumstances, and it all comes down to you. I don't like excuses. I don't like when people tell me, "I can't do this because of this" or "I don't find myself to be social because I lived through a lot of things that you may not understand." And I sit quietly and unless they ask me, I will not tell them my past, but I do not find those excuses acceptable because I am a pretty outgoing person. I have a fulltime job where I'm a manager, and I have nine employees. I have a really great life. I've built a wonderful home for myself and my son, and that's that.

Q: How do you square that complex history with also your opening statement about all the privilege that you have? How do those two things live next to each other?

Rachael: [02:50:23] Okay, so, I'll use this as an example. When I was in a city a couple weeks ago, I saw signs for a missing child who was a non-white race. Now these were just signs posted up like pieces of paper printed out, posted to a post. Not to say that they aren't properly represented in the news or the media, but the news and the media is skewed no matter whether you pick a conservative or a liberal news station, they are all skewed. Their primary focus is to make money. They are a business. They're not an educational reference. They are not a scholarly source, and more often than not, if a white child goes missing, how quickly are you going to see it on the news versus the south side of Chicago kid in Englewood [Illinois] and Roseland [Illinois]? When are you going to see them on the news like that [snaps]? You're not, if at all.

So growing up with the abuse and the traumatic events that I had, it was shed light on very quickly, thankfully, and I'm very grateful for that, even in an inner city school, but is that because I was white? Is it because people were watching me? Is it because my mother made sure I was watched? I can't really tell you why that exactly is, but I do know that I'm not the only one in the entire school that was suffering through those events. I mean several children. I mean one in four women are abused at some point in their lives, and—sorry, I lost my place.

Q: I was asking how you consider both sort of recognize your privilege and be very in touch with the trauma that you've suffered. It's just that many times people can't—you have to pick one or the other, you know what I'm saying? It's hard to understand how you're living in that environment and talking about your privilege at the same time and how you said from an early age you saw that. So even when these events were unfolding, you also saw privilege. Am I correct?

Rachael: [02:51:18] Yes, agreed. I completely agree, and that is why even as I was going through the abuse anything I did not take for granted what I had, and one thing my mother ingrained in me was it could always be worse, because I knew that she loved me and that she would do anything she could in her power. Unfortunately, in the county I lived in at the time, this is the '90s—you got to realize—this is the beginning of the '90s domestic violence had just become—thank you, Joe Biden—an actual law. It was not against the law for him to beat her senseless. It's his wife. He can come home and beat her. There was nothing that anyone could do about that.

So you have to translate that into child abuse versus spanking was a complete normal thing. Okay, well, spanking is normal. Okay, but is taking a cutting board and beating your child senseless with it? Whipping their back with a belt? Is choking them, telling them they're a bitch like their mother when they're three years old, having their step-children sexually abuse you? No, that's not ideal, but I also knew that I was loved in another home, and that I did have opportunities that were endless, and my mother made damn sure that I was an amazing—I had endless opportunities.

She was an amazing example. She went to college fulltime. She was a fulltime nursing student, and then she worked three other jobs and was a mother, and she somehow made it so that she was not absent in my life, and by doing that, I knew that I could do anything I wanted no matter what my circumstances were. If she could do all of that and hold us together, then there is no reason why I couldn't also do anything that I put my mind to.

Q: Do you feel connected to white culture?

Rachael: [02:52:08] What would you define as white culture?

Q: Well, that's a question for you. Maybe the first question would be is there a white culture?

We talk about Latino culture—

Rachael: [02:52:12] Absolutely.

Q: —or black culture so if there's—what is white culture, in your opinion?

Rachael: [02:52:15] White culture, let's see. Very privileged, and I don't want to say ignorant because not everyone is ignorant. There's just a small group of people who are ignorant, and the problem is especially right now in today's society with social media, with the politics, they have a bigger voice than they should, and that is unfortunate for the rest of us who have to stand up and fight back, but that's not going to silence us, and that's perfectly fine with me. Just fight a little harder. Grow a little stronger. White culture to me is—that's just an abomination to America. There shouldn't be white culture, black culture, this culture.

Yes, everyone should have their own, I guess, sense of background and sense of beliefs, but we should all be bringing them together, and I know that's not realistic, and it's not ideal in today's world, and that's the hippy mother of mine has ingrained this peace, love, happiness. To me I live—let me give you an example. I live in a neighborhood where there is white. There is black. There is Asian. There is a lot of Burmese immigration. I like living in a neighborhood like that where only two of my apartment neighbors are white. It brings together so much conversation, so much culture, and if you live in a predominantly—if you live in what you call

white culture, you would be surrounded by white beliefs whether that be agnostic, Christian reformed, Catholic. You're going to find a generalization whether they be Republican, Democrat. It doesn't matter. There's going to be this overall glaze of well, that's like a white people thing. I didn't see it so much until I moved to Battle Creek. I believe my first experience was walking downtown at nighttime and going into a local bar and seeing the segregation firsthand. When you looked around the bar, you didn't see groups of people who were intermixed race. You saw all white, all black, and it was apparently segregated, and I stepped outside for fresh air, and I'm a social person.

I just strike up conversation with anyone, and someone looked at me, and they said, "You're not from here, are you?" And I was just like, "What are you talking about?" And he says, "The way you carry yourself and the way you speak to me like you would speak to anyone else, that's not known around here." And now I don't know if that's true. I don't know if that's just his point of view, but he was a black man, and I didn't think anything different of speaking to him.

Q: Living in a diverse neighborhood, how does that make you feel about your own individuality?

Rachael: [02:53:31] Living in a diverse neighborhood develops my individuality in ways that a one-race neighborhood could not give me. I am able to expose myself to different religions, different beliefs, different cultures, different food. I mean just every aspect you would think of. When you live in a one-race neighborhood, one ethnicity, you're going to see the same. It's all generally the same. You can stereotype it. You can generalize it. What I love about living in this salad bowl mix of an area is that you will always have different influences creating you.

So as I'm growing up and identifying myself and becoming ingrained into the adult world, I'm finding out what I like, what I believe, and I do believe that the neighborhood around me helps shape that in some ways because I'm seeing how I make my decisions. Just the simple things you think about in life or what you expose your child to, you would never think if you lived in a predominantly white neighborhood and you didn't live next to Burmese people who showed you different food, would you go and cook that on your own? I mean without having been exposed to it would you just think, "I think we're going to make some Burmese food tonight?" No. The politics. Would you have as much firsthand knowledge about DACA, about green cards? You can read it on the news, and you can have your own opinion, but have you seen a child firsthand, what it's like for them to live in a culture knowing that they could never really get a job or never really apply to college without there being some kind of redline tape in front of them?

Q: But that's all external. I'm thinking more internally. How then does it help you define who you are? Does that make sense? The idea is that if you see yourself in relationship to your community and it's not—you're also bringing something to that community yourself, and how do you then understand who you are and where you come from being in that neighborhood?

Rachael: [02:54:26] I guess I don't really see myself as offering a whole lot to the neighborhood. It sounds weird, but I am quiet. I'm very polite to everyone, and I love hearing them tell me about their lives, but I don't know how I really—that influences my identity by living there.

Q: Well, I guess what I'm thinking—what I'm trying to get at is just – I think often about myself and how I see myself depending on where I am. I live in New York City [New York]. It's a very complicated city, and I see myself one way, and then if I go to let's say Kansas City [Missouri] or a culturally monolithic place, I feel very, very different about myself in that space because I recognize that I'm bringing something into that space, and it's received different ways. Does that make any sense?

Rachael: [02:54:49] I guess you could say—yeah, when I travel into the city sometimes, I go to Chicago [Illinois] on a regular basis, and the difference being when I am home versus when I am there—like living in a city like New York, Chicago, you don't necessarily know your neighbors. You don't necessarily—I guess what I bring is just that I'm accepting and open. I'm not going to hold against you your race, your culture. I know that there are people who would never move where I move, live where I live because of the multi-racial neighborhood that it brings. For me I think that helps me bring acceptance—it shows them that I bring acceptance—I don't know how to answer this question. I'm sorry.

Q: Let's try one more time, and then we'll move on. How does it help you understand your own culture, your own cultural identity, your own identity as a woman?

Rachael: [02:55:18] I think living where I live helps me understand my own culture and identity as how privileged I am. I live in a lower income apartment complex, and I didn't come from a working class so moving—it's kind of weird but moving down the scale in living aspects has

showed me the cultural differences that I have and that I bring to them. I don't know. I'm trying to think like—

Q: Don't feel like you have to—this is what I mean about being an expert on yourself. If you don't feel [unclear], what I would say is that again for me I just feel cloaked when I'm in monolithic thing, and I feel like I actually get seen for who I am when I'm in diverse settings. That's all that I was trying to—and try to understand the difference in how people see themselves when they live in very segregated communities, how they see themselves as an individual and as they see their relationship to their culture versus how they see themselves when they're in diverse communities and how they see what the—whether it actually helps them see their culture more or see themselves more clearly because they're not cloaked by something that just feels—pervasive anyways. That's what I was trying—

Rachael: [02:56:01] I guess I don't do a lot of self-reflection honestly. I'm always trying to figure out how I can help others and how I can be available to other people. I don't really think about what I'm offering to the community.

Q: How do you think the community sees you?

Rachael: [02:56:07] I have no idea. [laughs] I don't even think about it. I just live my life being as nice as I can and offer help where it's needed and just go about my business. I don't really think about what people think about me. I don't think I'd sleep at night if I did that. You can't go through life living that way.

Q: I'm sure that people think you're horrible. [laughter] Going back to this idea of white culture, do you feel part of white culture? You've identified as white throughout, and you're white and having privilege throughout this conversation, do you feel connected to a wider white culture?

Rachael: [02:56:25] In what sense?

Q: Do you feel like it relates to you? Do you feel like you're part of it? Do you feel like you can access pieces of your whiteness to move through the world the way you want to move through the world, to get things that you want, to get somehow in your job, in your social life?

Rachael: [02:56:33] Yes and no. I feel that being white I have some privileges to advance in ways that others may not in my job, in the career that I'm trying to pursue, in my housing situation, financially, anything in that regards. In some ways, no, in that I don't know it has so much to do with white culture as it has to do with class and where I rank on working class versus middle class versus upper class. But what is white culture? When you look at the richest people, they are in the top 3 percent in America, is predominantly white, but they're also white male, and for me being a single mom at twenty-six and living where I live and being a part of white culture in a way that I work in a place that is predominantly white. I grew up white in a school that had predominantly white students after I left the inner city elementary school, and I feel that I can keep succeeding in my job. I can keep climbing up the ladder. There is no green card. There is no education. There's nothing stopping me from doing exactly what I want to do in that sense.

Educationally, I feel a little disadvantaged in some ways but not that I can't get it if I want it, it's just financially. And I don't know that that's really part of white culture so much as it is the education system in America. For example, I did have my loans deferred until next year, thanks to Obama, and I would have been able to save for a nicer car or things to make my son's life better for the both of us, and because of the decisions recently made by the Education Department that was reversed, and my wages were immediately garnished, and they take about 25 percent of my paycheck. And they don't care that I'm white. They don't care that I'm a single mom. [cries] They don't care that that makes me struggle.

So I would say that for that, no, white culture did not help me access more in that way. Now when I called and explained to them my financial situation, what I pay for, that I do not receive alimony, child support, I do not ask for government assistance, I am not on WIC, I am not on food stamps, I work fulltime, and that does not matter to the Department of Education in the United States. For me, that's great that that's equal. They didn't give me a pass because I was white and say, "Oh, we can make an exception here," but at the same time, what are you doing to our culture then in general? Are you generalizing me because I'm not a certain class?

So in white culture, who is privileged? It's middle to middle-upper class and upper class white and predominantly male. If you are below that and still white, it does not matter. You can ask a working class or impoverished class white person if they feel privilege like they can do anything they want to do, they're going to tell you no because they don't have the education, they were not offered it, they were not offered the means to exceed at the rate that they could have if that were the case.

Q: What parts of you—because again you continually refer to yourself as white in this thing—do you feel make you white?

Rachael: [02:58:32] What I feel makes me white is my skin color and my lack of experience being discriminated against, whether that means by someone choosing me as a friend, by an employer choosing me as an employee, by a school choosing me to enter. I didn't have to live wondering—I don't have to drive down the road and wonder if the cop is going to pull me over because of my race. I don't have to worry about any disadvantage with being associated as white.

If you see me walking down the street, you are not going to for one second blink and think, “Oh, she has Hispanic in her.” You're not going to sit there and ask for my green card. I'm not going to have ICE knock down my door. I still believe that being white, no matter what class though, may not have all the opportunities given to you, but in a generalization of your everyday life, you are not being discriminated against by the general American public.

Q: What about your personality, the way you are, and the way you see the world? What of that feels very white to you? Because you're clearly different from your Burmese neighbors and different from your black neighbors and Latino neighbors. What about you would you say, “Oh, that's kind of like a white thing the way I engage the world or the way I engage other people”?

Rachael: [02:59:15] I would say the way I speak is different than the cultures around me just from my vocabulary to my grammar to how I would deal with situations in general life are different than other ethnicities or races around me. For example, just being white I will choose to put my son in a certain school or pick a certain meal for dinner. That comes from white culture.

That comes from being influenced—from being white in my life I believe. There are so many stereotypes for every single race, and I guess for me it's just I always see myself as an equal, but I'm becoming more aware of how other people see me, and it's really difficult because I don't—I just try to be peaceful and keep to myself in some ways. Unless you ask me a question, then I'm an open door, but if you don't ask, I'm not going to say anything. I will be quiet and sit there and listen to you all day.

So for me, I guess it's easier to say how other people see me. Other people see me they have told me they see me as my vocabulary is more expanded than they have been exposed to, or they say that I act uppity, or that the way I dress gives me away. They say that I don't fit the neighborhood I live in. When I leave my apartment, people usually say I don't match where I live which was news to me because I did not think of myself as sticking out or being so different that you noticed me, but people have told me more recently, “Well, you dress differently than us,” or, “You just talk so funny.” I guess that could be white culture you could define that as, just the education system, growing up, what I was around, who spoke to me. My teachers were predominantly white. That's the language I was taught.

Q: Are you happy you are white?

Rachael: [03:00:22] That's a really weird question. [laughs] Am I happy I'm white? Well, I don't really have much choice in the matter. I don't really think about that honestly. I've always been open to dating and being friends with anyone of any race so for me am I happy I'm white? See I don't really—I wouldn't say no. I'm not unhappy that I'm white, but I wouldn't say, “oh I'm so happy I'm white” because that's just saying yes I like being privileged. I like having the upper

hand on things. I don't think that's fair, and that's not equal, and that's not the way the world should work.

So no, I'm not happy I'm white in that regard. I'm happy that I don't have to fear for my safety in some ways, but why should I have to not fear, be able to live that way but someone else does have to fear? A Muslim girl has to worry about walking down the road and being harassed especially in this day and age, and I can walk down the road and no one is going to turn and give me a second look. But that doesn't make me happy, that makes me upset for them.

Q: Would you give up your whiteness if you walked out of this room and there was one door where you would emerge as you are and another door with a fifty-fifty chance that you would walk through and emerge as a black woman? Would you choose either door, or would you make a choice? If so or if not, why?

Rachael: [03:01:00] If I walked through a door and there was a fifty-fifty choice of becoming black or Hispanic or anything other than white, I—honestly I wouldn't care. God's like—

Q: [unclear] question.

Rachael: [03:01:05] What do you mean?

Q: One is the fifty-fifty chance. Other door is you're guaranteed to stay as you are. Would you choose one door voluntarily, or would you choose the possibility, or would you choose the definite?

Rachael: [03:01:13] I would probably choose the possibility because for me it's just, that's not really up to me. Personal belief, God chooses that. I don't choose my race or—if you want to say, your parents choose who they mate with and create you. I would probably choose going through the fifty-fifty door because I don't—I will take what life gives me, regardless of my race or my background.

Q: Are you religious? Do you have a religious belief? Do you go to church and believe in God?

Rachael: [03:01:26] I was raised in what we call the Bible belt around here, and predominantly Christian Reformed Catholic town, and I went to Catholic school. I have sat through catechism and several Sunday schools and youth groups, and I do not go to church every Sunday. I am what you would call the C and E Christian. I go to church on Christmas and Easter to make my mama happy. That is not because I am angry at God. It's not because I don't believe. I—honestly, I work and I am somewhat of a workaholic. I love my job. I love what I do, and I will choose to work Sundays, and if I get a Sunday off, I love being a part of experiments like this. [laughs]

Yeah, I don't feel the need to go to church every Sunday in order to have a relationship with God. That is a personal thing. It is also because I believe in LGBTQ rights. It is because I believe that just because I'm an unwed mother I'm not damned to hell. I did stand in front of the church at six months pregnant and make profession of faith, and that was something that the pastor put his hand on me and he said, "You are going to support this girl, or you are not being a Christian or doing as what you promised you would to God," and I appreciate that environment greatly. But that is not the case in every single circumstance, and it's definitely not the case for

every church. So no personally, I do not go to church every Sunday, and when it comes time, my son will make his own decision, and I will offer him a multitude of faiths or opportunities, and whatever he chooses to become is his choice.

Q: Is the father of your son white?

Rachael: [03:02:19] He is English and French, yes. He appears very dark because of the French so the father of my son is very tall, but he has darker skin, dark hair, dark eyes. People have confused him for another race with me. They've asked me several times, but our son looks extremely white so there's no question on that one, but yeah, they have asked if he's a little bit Hispanic or Latino or something along that line, and he is not. It's just the French.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you think is really important to include in this conversation?

Rachael: [03:02:35] There was a question in the survey that I found really intriguing, and it said do you feel that your personality is defined by genetics predominantly or is it the life experiences that you have had? I really struggled with picking one on there because for me I've done lots of studies with psychology and even just in general with the human body, and most studies today say that 90 percent of your genetics as far as your physical features go like that's all 90 percent and 10 percent is what you control whether you're fat, you're skinny, you have acne, you have skin problems.

Only 10 percent of that you can control, but then when you translate that over from what can I control about my appearance to my personality and how that develops you in how you perceive the world and how people perceive you, that does have a lot to do with your life experiences. I do not believe that I would be as accepting to other cultures and as humble in understanding if I had not gone through all of the things I have gone through in life. If I had not experienced the turmoil would I be grateful for all the things I have? Would I be grateful I have a roof over my head or food in my stomach if I didn't spend part of my childhood starving or being hungry? I mean, my mother did what she could to put food on the table, but I mean there's definitely times where it was out of her control, when I was in my biological father's watch, so to speak, and I did go hungry for weeks at a time. And I believe that those circumstances definitely shaped how I view myself as a person, as a white female, as an American in general.

Q: We really appreciate you coming in and speaking with us and being so open and honest. It's really a privilege to talk to you this way. I hope that this was a relatively—

Rachael: [03:03:27] It's fascinating. [laughter] I'm reading *The South Side* right now about Chicago and just about the different neighborhoods which I grew up near one of them so it's— about the segregation and just even today how segregated it is, and when I go back and visit, I talk with one of my best friends lives in Chicago, and he lives just west of Wrigley Field. I'm looking around, and I'm just like, "You live in an all-white neighborhood, don't you?" "Yes." He knows that I do not live in an all-white neighborhood. He knows where I live, and he said, "I would never choose to live there." I'm like, "What? Why?" It's just so intriguing to me that they will not. It's not even just white people. I mean you've got to look at Englewood versus

Roseland. The Irish white people and the Polish white people. You do not see them intermixing race. My friend right now is 100 percent Polish. She's dating a non-Polish man, and at this day and age, and she's only in her mid-twenties, it is a big deal. She's from Chicago. It is a huge deal. So it's very fascinating.

Q: It is complicated. Well, anyway thank you for—we'd like to take a few stills of you now. So you just sit.

[END OF INTERVIEW]