

STUDY ON WHITE PEOPLE

The Reminiscences of

Charleen Nicholson

INCITE

Columbia University

2018

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Charleen Nicholson conducted by Whitney Dow on May 13, 2018. 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.

ATC

Session #1

Interviewee: Charleen Nicholson

Location: Cheyenne, WY

Interviewer: Whitney Dow

Date: May 13, 2018

Nicholson: My full name?

Q: Yeah.

Nicholson: [01:01:19] Okay, my name is Charleen Nicholson, I have lived in Cheyenne [Wyoming] for twelve years. I moved here from Oregon. And, I have three children, and I am married, and I am in the middle of looking for work, so I'm unemployed. I do start school this summer. I'm trying to get my prerequisites out of the way so that I can apply to the radiography technologist program, I think that would be—I don't know, medicine is kind of something that—I'm a medical assistant by trade, so that's something that—I'm interested in patient care, and radiography technologists tend to make more money than medical assistants. So, and it's a two-year degree for right now, so that's that.

Q: Sam told me that you were right interested in doing this interview within this project. What was it about it that you thought was interesting and made you want to participate?

Nicholson: [01:02:15] I feel like—okay, so, I don't know where to start on that. I could not believe that somebody was making this. Obviously, I didn't know all of the details about the

film, but I did get an email after I did the survey, saying, basically it said, how has whiteness affected your life? And it felt like, I don't know, like, you guys knew that that was a thing in my life, that that was a theme, that was something that I have dealt with my entire life, and nobody's ever asked me.

Nobody's ever asked me, you know, how has not being tan, or being, you know, mixed race, but how has the white part affected you and your life? And that's super interesting, because I don't really tend to focus on, you know, like, the nonwhite part of myself, it's been kind of an issue to have this whiteness, and it's just been a theme and a huge stressor for me. And now you guys are talking about it, and I'm like, oh my god, I have to talk to these people, I have to engage in this conversation.

Q: Well, tell me a little bit about your racial background and how this—about this complex equation that you're talking about.

Nicholson: [01:03:36] Okay. So, my race is a little bit mixed. My dad is a bunch of white, he's all kinds of white, with a little bit of Native American, we got some Cherokee and I don't exactly know how much he is, so, I mean obviously I don't know how much I am. My real mother was Native American. I'm from a reservation in Alaska. And her mother was a little bit Russian with another tribe, and then her father, my grandfather, was full-blooded Rocentian [phonetic], I don't know, it's not super-common tribe. And then a couple of other tribes from—right now they're from southeast Alaska, that's where the reservation is. Originally, all of those people were from Canada, like, northern Canada and places like that.

So, I've just always been told that I'm half Indian. That's the term that I was told as a young child. My father raised me. He got custody of me when I was two, and moved me from the reservation in Alaska to Oregon, and that's where I was raised, and I would go visit my family on the reservation every summer. So, that's just—you know, I'm half white and I'm half Native, or, you know, half Indian. I didn't actually start using the term Native American until I was probably twelve or thirteen, you know, getting a little bit older and more mature, and wanting to know—you know, people are different, we're learning our differences and stuff, so that was when I really started to be like, "it's Native American".

Q: How do you feel connected to your white half, and how do you feel connected to your Native American side?

Nicholson: [01:05:36] That's a super complicated question. I feel connected to my white—it's just how I was raised. You know, my dad was pretty much white, and he raised me. I'm from a really, really small town in Oregon. Super small, like four thousand people. And, everyone was white, with the exception of, you know, a couple of black kids, and then we had three other Native American people in my school. So that was just my life. When I would go visit Alaska, I was the white kid. I was very white. I mean, you know, I'm super pale compared to my family, and I live in, you know, the big states. You know, they're in this little tiny island where there's their culture and that's it. And, you know, when I would visit, I felt pretty disconnected from my family, I felt very disconnected from my culture.

And I get kind of emotional about it because it makes you feel like a total alien. Like, you're here with your mom and your grandma and your grandpa and all your cousins, and aunts and uncles, and they're all super brown, and they're all dancing, and making traditional food, and I don't know, how to like, debone a fish with my eyes closed, or whatever, make seaweed, that's a traditional—that's part of our tribe, that's what, we eat a lot of seaweed, and all my family are like, fishermen and stuff like that, so it's a really coastal tribal vibe, you know, and I just didn't feel part of it, ever.

Q: And when you were in your town in Oregon, did you feel white?

Nicholson: [01:07:26] No [laughs]. I did not feel white living in my white town in Oregon. I've never been able to just be, I've never been able to identify as one or the other, you know, it's been a real struggle for me. I'm tanner than all of the people I went to school with, you know, like I said, with the exception of a couple of black kids we had, and then there were, I think three other Native American students. And, so, kind of a funny little story. You know when you register for school, your parents put their race or whatever, and I don't think my dad did that. I got my school records sometime after high school or something, I got some educational records, you know, with all of my information and everything, and they had my race as Mexican. My whole school year, all of my years in school, I was Mexican. And it just, like, cckk [phonetic], you know, I just thought, really? You guys didn't think to ask me?

I was in a program called Indian education, from, I think second grade until fifth grade, and so it was basically, I think it was designed to have, you know, when they did the boarding houses,

way back when, and all the, you know, little Native boys, and they cut all their, you know, their ponytails off, and they made them speak English, I think it was like an offshoot of that, it was some, like, residual thing, you know, where I had to go once a week into a little room with some lady, and go over, like, homework and stuff. And then she would talk to me about little things like my culture, and I didn't know anything about it, and I just know I had to go to this Indian education once a week. And me and this other girl were the only two that had to go. And it just set me apart, and I felt not part of my culture while I was participating in Indian education, because I wasn't raised around it, it wasn't my culture, but, I mean, it got me out of my class for an hour, so, I don't know.

Q: What part of your white half do you feel that you can access and have a connection to, and what part of it do you feel that you can't access?

Nicholson: [01:09:52] When can I be white?

Q: Yeah.

Nicholson: [01:09:55] So, I—it's kind of, it's not that funny in reality, because it's something I've struggled with, but I, I have a saying, not a saying, but it's just something I kind of joke about. It was during a conversation I had with a white friend, and it was talking about white privilege, and she didn't understand what white privilege was. And, so, I politely tried to educate her on that, and it wasn't, it was not going through, it was not – she was not on board with that at all. And I tried to tell her, like, I said something to the effect of, "I have white privilege if I stay

out of the sun for long enough. Like, my skin is light enough, I'm pasty enough, that if I had to, if they did some kind of raid, where all the brown people had to come, I could probably, if I stay in the shadows a little bit, when I stayed out of the sun for a while, I could pass, I could be white." That's about as useful as that has—you know, it's occurred to me to be useful. I don't think it's something that I've ever needed to access, per say, maybe I'm not understanding the question. Do you think I understand the question?

Q: No, I think you understand the question, but what I'm trying to get a sense of is that – you were raised by your white father, and you're obviously very close to him. You were raised in the white community, you see yourself as not connected, not that connected to the Native culture. So, do you see yourself as white?

Nicholson: [01:11:34] Do I see myself as white? I don't know. I have no idea. I guess, maybe, nobody's ever asked me that, ever [laughs]. I guess, no. I don't know. Why am I so uncomfortable with that question? I have no idea. I don't think so, because I do have that background in my heritage, and, you know, I have dark eyes and dark skin, darker skin than most white people, and dark hair, and I don't know.

Q: Do you see yourself as Native?

Nicholson: [01:12:11] I do, yeah.

Q: This is always, like, confusing to me, because I see you, you know, you're half white, half Native American, raised in a white family in a white town, I don't know, is your husband white?

Nicholson: [01:12:24] He's half Greek [laughs]. And half white, yeah.

Q: He's half Greek. [crosstalk] and yet you don't feel you can access that. It's kind of like, I always ask this question, is Barack Obama black or white? And this idea that he's half white, raised in a white family —

Nicholson: [01:12:41] But he's black.

Q:—lived in the White House, all these things, but, you know.

Nicholson: [01:12:46] Barack Obama's black [laughs].

Q: And the question is, why?

Nicholson: [01:12:52] Maybe because it's better to not be white. That's been my experience.

Q: Can you talk to me about that?

Nicholson: [01:12:59] Yeah. I mean, from where I'm from, I'm from the small little white logger town, in Oregon, and there's a lot of racism there, lots and lots of racism, a lot of hillbillies, and

in my own family, there's a lot of racism, which still, to this day, makes absolutely no sense to me. Being white has never done me ever good, knowing white people has never done me any good, white people have really done me no good, personally. There's no benefit to saying, "Oh, by the way, I'm half white," or whatever, or how much white I am. There's been no benefit for me.

Whereas being Native American, being part of this cool culture, with cool food, and we have our own language, and we dance, and it's welcoming, and it is a tribe, it's close. And even I wasn't raised there, I mean, I do feel a little bit more, I want to claim that more, you know what I mean? I want to claim that more than my dad's like—I don't even know what he is, he's Scandinavian or Irish or something. You know? I don't have any desire to get to know his culture, at all.

Q: So do you wish that you weren't half white?

Nicholson: [01:14:26] I do, all the time. I wish I wasn't white all the time. I say this very often, I say, "I wish I was either a hundred percent white, or I was a hundred percent something else." I don't like to be half of anything, I don't like to be mixed, I don't like to battle with this identity within myself, and I don't enjoy whatever resentment, or fear, or this weird identity thing that I've had my entire life. It's not fun. And I'm sure it's all me, it's all in my head. It's not like you care, or anyone I come across, anyone in my family, anyone in my friends, people I meet, they don't care, for the most part, it's not like it's going to make my life better or worse.

Q: So, if you could choose between being totally white or totally Native American, which would you choose?

Nicholson: [01:15:19] Totally Native American, I'd be full-blooded, hundred percent. Even with all the struggle that comes with that, if I could choose, I would be a hundred percent any tribe. I'd pretty much be any race but white.

Q: And why is that you would choose to be—from a practical standpoint, as you touched with your friend, there's a lot of advantages to being white.

Nicholson: There are.

Q: So why would you not choose to be white?

Nicholson: [01:15:47] So, I wouldn't choose to be white, although white privilege is something that is, you can't buy that shit, you can't buy that. That's something that is very, I mean, you've got it made, you've got it made, you don't have to deal with stereotypes, or whatever parts of life that you don't get a fair crack at for being a little darker. I would deal with that, I would. I've dealt with a little bit of that in my life, I've dealt with racism and prejudiced people and things like that, and it's never been something that I can't handle. I've had my feelings hurt, I've had my heart broken, but I just wouldn't—maybe it's just more interesting to not be white. And I understand that there's different cultures within like, lighter-skinned people from different areas,

like, Irish people have beautiful culture, you know, Scottish people, and that's really all I can think of. All the white people, they have beautiful cultures, and I just would rather be brown.

Q: And do you feel like you can access that part of you at all, the brown part of you?

Nicholson: [01:17:16] Yes. I do, I feel like I'm more Native American-looking than white. I do get mistaken for Mexican a lot, and I'll take it, I'm fine with that. I'm okay with that, like, I've given up that battle that I dealt with pretty much all my life growing up. And I'm okay with that. I just would rather be a little darker, and mistaken for Mexican than be white.

Q: What about your kids? Do you consider your kids white?

Nicholson: [01:17:50] That's a good question, and it's kind of a two-parter. Here's the thing with my children. I have three children. I have a fifteen-year-old son that I had—all of my children have different dads. So I did have a sordid past, I had some issues getting everything right, which I'm still, I haven't quite figured that out. But I had my first son when I was eighteen. His dad is totally white, super blond, blue-eyed, really the whitest guy you've ever met. And then my next, my thirteen-year-old son, who I brought with me today, his dad is Indian, like, from India, like, not Native American, but from India. And so he's darker, and he's got all of those features. And my daughter is eleven, and her dad is Scottish, like, super white, not from Scotland, but he's white, and she's pretty white, you know, they're pretty—I guess two out of three of my children are white. And it's a topic that we talk about in the house, race is not something that we don't talk about, we absolutely talk about it. I'm trying to help my son, he's fifteen, he's, you know,

darker blond, he's got green eyes, and he's just super white-looking. He has his own identity issues with that. He knows where I came from, he knows what kind of culture that I have had as far as my tribe and everything like that, and he wants that, he wants to be that so badly, and he gets picked on at school if he brings up that he's Native American. Because I'm registered, all my kids are registered tribal members, it's like the first thing I did was make sure that they were registered within my tribe, and he gets so hurt about—you know, his friends make fun of him, because he's super pale, and it's just something that he's struggled with, it's something that he's had to cope with on his own, and I feel like, oh my gosh, that's the same thing I dealt with. But he's not tan in any way.

But he wants to identify as Native American. He has every right to do that. But it's a bitch, it's very hard. My half-brother, we both came from my mom, and his dad is white. My half-brother is blue-eyed, and blond hair, and has very pale skin. And he has dealt with the same stuff. We have the same mom, we should be the same color, but his dad's genes were more dominant, I suppose, and he's very, very white. And so that's been his issue, you know, getting taken seriously as a Native American, you know, because everyone's a Native American. Everyone's aunt or grandma or something, everyone's got a little bit, and I feel like he thinks he's part of that, "Oh, I'm one, you know, thirty-second, or sixty-fourth, or whatever, I'm Cherokee," when he really is, like, a good percentage, you know, and he doesn't look like it, so that's rough, I guess.

Q: Tell me a little about Cheyenne—we talked about this before we started rolling the camera, a little about Cheyenne.

Nicholson: Is this my water too?

Q: Yes, you can have it, it's all your water, everything over there is yours.

Nicholson: Okay. You got me a water bottle.

Q: What brought you to Cheyenne? And what can you tell me about the community?

Nicholson: [01:21:24] Okay. In 2006, I was dating a guy from high school. And we had been trying to date since high school, but had both either been in a relationship or, you know, moved away or whatever. And I was twenty-one, and we were both single, I was newly single, and we got together and started dating. And I was so happy, it was so exciting, we finally got to start dating after all these years. And he informed me that he had joined the Air Force. So, we didn't know where things were going to be, we just kind of laid back, and he went off to boot camp, and then he called me and said, "Hey, I got my orders." And I said, "Oh my gosh, where are we going?" Because I was obviously going to go with. And he said, "Cheyenne, Wyoming." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, what is that? What's Wyoming?"

I didn't even know Wyoming was a thing. I mean, really, I had never, like, said the word Wyoming, ever. So I looked it up online, and there was beautiful pictures of the Air Force base, and the parks here, and things like that, and so in order for me to come be with him while he is stationed here, we had to be married. So, I took a bus, I took a Greyhound out here, it was forty-

four hours. It was the longest bus ride in my life. And I ended up north in Cheyenne, and me and him didn't work out, we were married five years, and we didn't work out. We had a beautiful daughter, and we did divorce, and then I met my now-husband, the real one, like, the real one, I met him here, and he has children here, and he's established a life here, he's been here over twenty-five years, so we're just here until we're not, I don't know what the plan's going to be. I don't think Cheyenne is going to be where we end up, though.

But, when I first got here, there were cowboy hats everywhere, I mean, everyone was wearing a cowboy hat. And I don't know, I felt like, you know, I went through the drive thru a couple of times, and then we went to the Walmart, you know, a few different places, like, my first week here, and I felt like—I don't feel this way anymore, but initially when I got here, I stereotyped everybody, I thought everyone was uneducated. I felt like everyone was, you know, a high school dropout, and not very well spoken, and rude. I felt like a lot of the people were rude here, you know, in customer service and things like that. And I personally did not feel like Cheyenne was like—I mean, it is super white, but I felt like, coming from where I came from, Cheyenne, Wyoming, has a way more diverse culture, maybe just population. Maybe Cheyenne just has a more diverse population, because of the air force base, that's where I lived for two years. And that was where I got exposed to way more races. You know, I knew one black kid growing up, I knew one black kid, and was my neighbor was black. And her husband was in the Air Force, he was white, and their children, you know, obviously, were black. But it was my first real interaction with someone who was from another state where there was a high population of black people. And I just loved it, it just felt like I was more connected with other cultures, because everyone was black, it seemed like everywhere I went, there were like, Mexicans or blacks, you

know, that's pretty much as far as the range of ethnicity went [laughs]. But I do feel like it has, thanks to the air force base, you know, Cheyenne has a lot of families, they root here, you know, they stay here, and they make their own families, and as far as I know, Cheyenne does have a pretty good range of ethnic culture. I know they have a good Greek population. Just because my husband's a Greek, and his family settled here. There's a huge Greek population. Hispanic, there's a lot of Hispanic people here. And, I don't know, I don't think it's as white as where I've been.

Q: So you're the only person I've ever met that moved to Wyoming for the diversity [laughs].

Nicholson: I'm the only person you've met? Oh, okay, I see what you're saying. It's so white. But where I'm—you guys should have done it in—

Q: [crosstalk] it's so white. [crosstalk] for the diversity. [crosstalk] in Wyoming where there's a lot more—

Nicholson: Absolutely. I know, it seems so funny, because it is Podunk, there's nothing here, it's grass, corn and farmers, and cowboys. But, I just, and I totally attribute it to that air force base bringing different people from all over the country. So, you guys should have probably done the film in Coquille, Oregon. Look it up, Coquille, Oregon. It's rough [laughs].

Q: What about the Native culture here? Did you make any connection to the Native culture here?

Nicholson: [01:26:46] I have tried to connect with the Native American culture here, because there is a rich one, there is, a lot of the population is from different tribes that were here before, and obviously they've stayed. I believe there's a reservation up north, and when I first got here, it's usually my goal to seek out, it's just a natural thing, I believe, with anyone, you seek out the people that you look like, you seek out the people that you connect with culturally. I don't even think it's something where like, a black person comes down like, let's find the black people. You know? I think it's just something that pulls you.

So when I came here, I did realize that there was a lot of Native American culture here, and so I wanted to connect. And I was going to join a dancing group, because I danced when I was little, and I thought, you know, I'm just going to get into it, I'm just going to connect with my culture. And this is a great place to do it. And I still haven't. It's been twelve years. And I did, like, I remember they had a—downtown in the summer, they do a lot of vendors and what is it called? Like, farmers' markets and things like that. And I went for a walk, and there was a booth, and this couple, this Native American couple, I can just tell [laughs]. They were selling, handmade dreamcatchers and stuff. And I just felt super drawn to them. So I stopped and I talked to them, and politely asked, "Are you Native American? Like, what tribe are you? Where are you from? How did you get here?" And I told them about myself, and, you know, that I'm lacking in, like, a Native culture, you know, I'd like to connect with some people, maybe join a drum circle, or do some dancing, or whatever. And I gave them my phone number, and they never contacted me, and I thought, well gee, don't they want to connect? Don't they care? So, it occurred to me that, maybe I care more than other people do, maybe it's something that I've needed and wanted, and I just don't know where to find it.

Q: So, we were talking before and you said you were really excited about the opportunity to have this conversation. What are some of the things that you really wanted to talk about in the context of this conversation? What's important to say?

Nicholson: [01:29:01] Well, I'm probably going to answer this wrong and not reword what you said, because maybe I don't understand it. Obviously I didn't entirely know what you were doing, what you guys were, what was the point of this. Just a statement, how has whiteness affected your life? Like I said, it's not something anyone's ever asked me, and I don't know that I have anything of value. As far as my experience goes, I don't think it's—you know, it is my experience, and it is my opinion, based off my experience, it's not necessarily, I don't feel like this is helping anybody, I don't feel like I have any words of wisdom. I've never experienced that, in like a social setting, where I would get together with other ethnicities and talk about, you know, here's been my struggle, and here's the solution, to my struggle. I don't have that. I don't have a solution. When I've dealt with any kind of prejudice or racism, it is how it is, you know.

Q: I don't think this part is about a solution, I think that we've talked to people, we've met a lot of people who are biracial, and multiracial, and I think, just hearing the stories about either being ashamed of their being white, or wanting to be more white, or—one was half black, talking about that she can't access her white culture at all, even though she was raised by her mother, and that everybody treats her as if she's black. I think that just hearing those stories, I think that so much of our discussion on race is binary, and it's not really a binary discussion. I mean, yes, there are people who are [unclear] I'm about the whitest dude you've ever met, I'm probably, if not that—

[unclear] your first husband. But it's not a binary conversation. And, especially as this country considers that the demographics change, there's many, many people who have complex racial identities. And we talk about those complex racial identities, we talk about what it's like to be an Indian American, or a Mexican American, or a black American. But so often, that piece of whiteness is left out of the conversation, that people would want to come and talk to you about you being Native American all day, and kind of like ignore this big thing that's part of you [laughs]. And so that's kind of—I don't think we have a solution, or are looking for a solution. More that, as a white person, I feel like we're never forced to enter the conversation on race as if we are as other, and as someone who's black or Mexican, that we are as other to them, we have our own culture, our own experiences, and we kind of take the position that it's kind of this passive thing that we have. And I would argue that if you're white, especially if you're white, it's an active, dynamic thing that's impacting you all the time, but you don't see it because it's not impacting you negatively, it's impacting you positively.

Nicholson: Oh, that's a really good point of view.

Q: And, so that was really kind of the impetus for the project, was how do you, kind of, how can you analyze whiteness, this thing that never really gets analyzed, and broken down, understood, because I think that you can raise up all the other voices you hear, but if you don't create ears that can hear them, you kind of are having a one-sided conversation. So, I think your experience is fascinating, and it's really interesting to me that this thing has sort of weighed on you your whole life. And it sounds like it's caused a lot of pain and drama in your life, because you don't—you know, America loves to be able to say, "You are this." And not everybody is a this. I

mean, how do you live when you're not a this, and how do you participate in the multicultural thing that you are in this very complicated American space?

Nicholson: [01:33:35] So, are you spotlighting, you know, yes, these people are mixed, and they have different races or different ethnicities, and how they experience their life, identifying either way, but also with like this caveat of like, don't forget your whiteness, or how has whiteness worked for you?

Q: Or how has it impacted your life? I mean, those stories, talking about like, a guy who's half Mexican that we interviewed, he was talking about passing for white and wanting to be white, and being embarrassed that he was Mexican and trying to pass for white all the time, and then also feeling ashamed that he was rejecting that part of him. And it's a really interesting, it's just an interesting thing. So there's no one thing, we're not looking for a particular thing, we're actually just trying to—I think rarely would someone like you and someone like me have a conversation about this.

Nicholson: True.

Q: And, trying to sort of use what we're doing here to trigger thought process and self-reflection in other people, about their lives.

Nicholson: [01:34:41] So, sparking a conversation, sparking, like, which I think, what I thought that's kind of what the deal was, getting this talked about, getting this, don't be afraid of saying

these things, or expressing your experiences, or your feelings, or your opinions, or whatever, on this super-hot topic. It's not a hot topic. I don't see why it is. I don't understand the issue. And, I mean, I'm totally supportive of any kind of, especially an artistic endeavor, that will help kind of get the word out, get it talked about, you know? And not have it be such a like, "Oh god, she's going to talk about being black, oh my god, oh my god, what do I say? I'm not black, I don't know what to say!" You know, it's not like you don't have to just sit and listen to people talk about being brown. And white people can engage with that, they can listen and be open-minded, and experience this conversation with people, and say, "I don't know, I don't understand." You know, it's okay for white people to say, "I am not black, so I don't know what you are going through. I am not Mexican, I don't know what you are going through. I am not any mixed, obvious mixed race, or have any kind of cultural conflict in my household, or in when I was growing up. But it's interesting to me, and I want to be able to communicate with you, or I want to learn more about that."

I think there's a really cool way of doing that as white people. There's a really good way to appreciate that, and say, "I don't understand that, and I've never experienced that, but let's talk about it, I have questions." I think we, me, as a little bit of a brown person, I shouldn't be so fearful to say, "You know what? I've dealt with some shitty stuff. I've dealt with racism, I've dealt with sexism." You know, that's way more prevalent in my life than race is. But I've coped, I've dealt with that. That's not anything you'll ever deal with, on that type of level, you'll never deal with the same sexism that I've dealt with. And I think that gets talked about a little bit more, because you know, half the people are women. So it's not like we're black women, or Mexican women, or Native American women. It's just, I mean, all these different things that could be

little speed bumps along the way, they can be talked about, and I think it's safe to talk about, and I think it should be okay to talk about, which is why, you know, I'm open with my children about where I'm from, and kind of, the experiences that I've had with race. It's something, especially because my middle son is super brown. And he's already dealt with some racism. And my other two children won't ever have to deal with that. So we discuss that, as a family.

Q: Do you think that being mixed race or being a woman has had a bigger impact on your life?

Nicholson: [01:37:54] Oh lord. Well, I think that's I could just split that into so many different—being a woman has affected my life in certain ways that being white or being Native American it has nothing do to with. And there's different facets to my existence. And I don't—maybe it's all equal. I feel like I don't really have I feel like I don't really have as good of a chance, or the upper hand, as a white male would. I don't have as good of a chance, or whatever. It's a little bit harder for me, you know. And it's harder for other people than it is for me. It's harder for a black woman to exist and maybe get a career. Depending on where they live or how they were raised, or how they identify, and how they feel about themselves, I think statistically, she would struggle more than I would, because like I said, I can pass, I can pass for white if I stay out of the sun [laughs]. So, I don't know, I think there's different benefits and all of that to all of that.

Q: Have you ever utilized your whiteness to get something that you wanted, or had a situation go the way you wanted it to?

Nicholson: [01:39:16] No, I've never utilized my whiteness for anything [laughs]. Definitely not. I do believe that I've gotten jobs based on my—the checkbox that I've marked, because, I don't know, a long time, ten, fifteen years ago, certain corporations like Walmart had a quota that they would have to meet. And so, I felt like, if it was between me and a super qualified cashier who's white, I would probably get picked, because it looks good on their statistics, their quota is met. And I don't have any proof of that, I just feel like, especially now, now it's like, cool to have brown people work for you. Now it's like, you look better as a company if you employ a certain percentage of nonwhite people. And if I can take advantage of that, I definitely—if I have to go tan and get an accent or whatever, I'll do that, I don't care if it gets me some benefits, I'm okay with that.

Q: That's interesting, it seems like you code switch, you can go these directions. Eric, do you have any questions?

Q2: I mean, your middle son could be considered white also.

Nicholson: [01:40:40] Yes. If you did, like, the math, I guess, he's like twenty-five percent, or something, yeah.

Q2: Has he ever brought up his race?

Nicholson: [01:40:51] Yes, my son has definitely brought up his race. His dad left when he was three weeks old, and I haven't spoken to him, I haven't seen him, I haven't heard anything from him since then. And when my son got a little bit older, he was in third grade, I believe, when I told him, the man that I married, my first husband, was the white dude. And at that age, when he was about eight years old, I mean, obviously you can tell, I'm not as dark as him, and my ex-husband is super white. I know he had some questions about where he came from; is this my real dad? And I sat him down one day, and I said, "I have to talk to you about something, it's about your dad." And he burst into tears, and he said, "I'm adopted, aren't I?" And I said, "Oh my gosh, is that what you thought this whole time?" He said, "I thought I was adopted." And I said, "No, you're definitely not adopted." And I did tell him the story about his real dad. And he still doesn't want anything to do with him. And he does have questions about his culture that I can't answer, you know, I'm not Indian, I've never experienced what it's like to be Indian. I can barely cook, like, curry chicken. And I'm not the one to give him those answers. And I know he's going to go on this journey about race, it's inevitable, it's going to happen, it just is, it's just a gimme.

Q: How do you create a cohesive family when all of you are perceived so differently by the world?

Nicholson: [01:42:29] Oh, my family all—none of us look alike. All my children are from different dads, and my husband now is none of their father. But he's been in their life for a long time, so he's pretty much their dad. And so, I've been asked, "Are your children adopted?" In a grocery store; just a random person. And I would get so offended if someone thought that I was babysitting, or I adopted these children. And, I mean, it's just a question, it's really nothing to get

offended over, it's just, people want to know. And maybe it's because they adopted a child, or maybe because they take care of kids, I don't know the reasoning behind that. But it's so not a big deal to get offended over. I think that we, as a family, we make sure that everything is talked about. Everything is talked about, whether it's, my son, "the brown one", he rides the bus with his older brother. And he hasn't ever really dealt with straight-up racism, like, name-calling, or anything like that. And, so, there was an older boy on the bus – he was an eighth-grader, my son is a seventh-grader. And there was nowhere to sit. And so he was going to go sit with this kid, he was the only seat available, I suppose, the one right next to this kid, and he went to go sit down, and the kid said, "I don't think so, Muslim boy." And it broke my son's heart. Like, as a mother, it just ate me alive, because it was the first time that he had dealt with something. First of all, it's not accurate, you know, obviously, we can see the flaws in that thinking. And I talked to him, I sat down with him, I said, "Let's talk about this, I know this hurt your feelings, and I know this made you feel a certain way. We can talk about it."

And he just didn't understand, first of all, why he would choose the word Muslim, you know, because my son's pretty – he's very intelligent, and he knows that that's just ridiculous. And he's never dealt with that, he's never been placed into a category based on his skin color. As far as I know. You know, this was the first time that he has dealt with that. And that rocked him. We discussed that, and we discussed ways to deal with that, you know, in what setting, and how it's going to be different in certain settings, and there's always going to be that, that like, don't take that shit, you can't just sit back and take that.

My reaction would be, I mean, I would flip out, I would flip out, and I'd probably punch a kid in the face if I ever got called something racist. That was like a thirteen-year-old boy. I've never done that, but I feel like that's what I wanted him to do, you know? I wanted him to do that, because it pissed me off. But it hurt his feelings, and me and my husband sat him down, and we had a conversation about it, and he knows that it's probably going to come up again. It's probably going to happen again, and it's okay. It is what it is, so I don't really, I don't know if I answered your question or not.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't talk about, over the course of the interview, is there anything we didn't talk about that you think is really important to say in the context of the conversation about race?

Nicholson: [01:45:50] I kind of want to come clean about something. So, I got one of those ancestry, the spit, the tube, you know, where you check, and you see what you are. And, so I did that, I got it for Christmas, my husband got it for me, and I got my results at the end of January. And, I've always been told that I am half Indian. And I knew it was like a little bit less, maybe, because my grandma had some Russian in her, but I always identified, you know, whatever my dad has, you know, percentage wise, it probably makes up for what my mom isn't, you know what I mean? And I took that, this was just this year, and, so, I got the results back, and it said I'm—what am I...twenty-six percent Native American. And then the rest of it, I'm nine percent Asian; nobody knows where that came from. And the rest of it is like Irish, I'm twenty-one percent Scandinavian, and twenty percent Irish, and then like, some percentage of like Wales,

England, U.K. area. And then a bunch of little, like, less than one percentages of other places like that.

And so that's kind of been something that I've been dealing with. My real mother's dead, she passed away, but I did contact her sister. And I said, "Hey, I got the test, what's going on here? I thought we were, like, more Native American than this." And she threw a fit. She's super, like, she's just—you know, set in her ways, and she's an older woman, and we don't talk about things like that, we don't talk about mixed races, we just don't. It's not been something that—you know, you just eat your rice and your fish, and you're Indian, and that's how it is, you know? [laughs] So, I talked to her about that, and I said, "I don't understand, you know, why am I so less?" And she said, "That's not right. There's no way it's right, it's just not right." And that's all she would say about it, and she told me, "Charleen, stop it. Just stop," when I tried to push the issue a little bit more.

So, my half-sister—all of my siblings are half-siblings, my mom had a slew of kids, and hardly any of them have the same dad. And so, my sister and I have the same mom, different dads, both white dads. And she got it done last month, and she contacted me and said, "Hey, I got these results, let's compare them." And she's more Native American than me. I have no idea. She's like thirty-seven percent Native American. So, I don't know if her dad was more, or if this is just fluky, but since I got that test, I am more stressed out about me, maybe I'm just not Native American, maybe I'm just one of those people, like I talked about earlier, that has the Native American grandma who's like, "I'm one sixty-fourth," or whatever. I'm just one of those people. So, I've been struggling with that for the last few months, and like, kind of pushing it aside, and

not wanting to learn about where I come from. I contacted my dad, and I told him about it, and he said, “There’s no way that’s right. There’s absolutely no way that’s right.” So both of my, sides of my family are like, “That’s BS,” you know? But, I mean it’s science, it doesn’t really lie.

Q: That’s a funny question is that, like, if your mother was Native American, and your father’s white, how does the addition of that DNA—how does it actually relate to your identity? If your experience was growing up white and going to this community, and being part of this Indian community for a part of the summer, even though you felt alienated from it, does the DNA trump your identity?

Nicholson: [01:49:36] In a way, I think that getting the DNA results made my issues with my identity a little bit worse, because I’ve always held on to that, I’m at least, like, forty-six percent, I’ve got to be, you know? And my aunt told me that, like, the percentages-wise, like, I would have to be thirty-five percent from my mom, based on like, her Russian heritage, that’s how much I would probably be, thirty-five, you know, a little bit over. And I got this, like, twenty-six or whatever, and it, yeah, it did, it affected the way that I feel like I’m not pure, I’m not— [laughs]—not pure, but I’m not genuinely part of that culture, even though all my brothers and sisters have probably the exact same amount, roughly, you know, I don’t know what the deal was with my sister. But it has affected the way that—I don’t know.

I feel like the only thing that makes me Native American is like, my cheekbones, and like, my almond-shaped eyes. And even my hair is really light, so I dye it darker. My brown eyes, and I tan super easily, I’m not tan right now, but when I tan I get super, super dark. So I feel like I’m

just holding on to that, that darkness, that beauty, that ethnicity, that it's important to me, and I don't know why.

Q: I think that's a really amazing way to stop. That's really fascinating, really—we really appreciate you coming in, and speaking with us.

Nicholson: Yeah. This was okay, this was not bad; it was pretty fun.

Q: And we're just going to take a few pictures of you, so just—

Nicholson: Oh, just stay here?

Q: No, just stand up.

Nicholson: Okay.

Q: Just a little bit.

Nicholson: Do I look okay?

Q: You look beautiful.

Nicholson: Thank you.

Q: You look twenty-five percent Indian American.

Nicholson: Thank you [laughs].

Q: Just look at me while I take this.

Nicholson: Okay. I can't [laughs].

Q: This is the hardest part.

Nicholson: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]