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Abstract

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The Personal Statement as a Marginalizing Rhetorical Device:
Merit and Racism in College Access

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review on the personal statement, merit, race, and racism through the application of colorblind and race-neutral policies. In an attempt to avoid racist admission policies, higher education place overwhelming emphasis on objective merits, such as grades. However, during the personal statement writing process, minoritized applicants' expression of merit may be affected by racial inequities, experiences, and educational preparation, both consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, by excluding race, colorblind merit policies may contribute to unexpected and unintentional racism in admissions. In this paper, college-choice theory (CCT), critical race theory (CRT), and critical literacy theory (CLT) are used to interrogate colorblind merit in higher education to suggest why race is an important feature of applicants' narratives in the personal statement context. If race is significant to applicants' identities, then their narratives would be incomplete without it. There is a need to centralize both merit and race in personal statement research to allow education professionals to appropriately assess applicants' statements. Reintegrating race in assessments could improve our understanding of selective college admission processes and inform recommendations to refine instruction and evaluation of applicants' personal statement writing.

Keywords: personal statement | racially minoritized applicants | selective college admission process | college choice theory | critical race theory | critical literacy theory

Introduction

Attention to merit and race is a core issue of selective college admission (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Warikoo, 2016). Traditionally, admission and access to selective universities has been dominated by White applicants (Karabel, 2005). In an effort to address racial inequity in access, admissions have instituted a colorblind approach to assessing the merit of applicants (Carbado & Harris, Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Park & Liu, 2014). However, the focus has emphasized merit at the exclusion of race, to reduce the influence of dominant racial privilege (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Karabel, 2005; Warikoo, 2016). According to Carbado and Harris (2008), this deprives the ability to convey some of the most critical elements of a racially minoritized applicant's (RMA) ability to persevere.

Researchers have addressed higher educational goals in racial equity of college access and social justice through a range of theories and legal precedents (Poon & Segoshi, 2018). Improving access for racially minoritized groups is the focus of extensive research and policy. There exists research on racial concerns revolving around receiving instruction on composing

statements, as well as racial concerns surrounding admission officers' assessment process of personal statements (Warren, 2013; Bastedo et al., 2019). There is little research on the role of race in the context of personal statement, as a portrayal of one's value to the selective institution. Therefore, a critical review of current literature may highlight ineffective policies, gaps in research, and hidden bias toward RMA applications (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Warikoo, 2016). This effort enables us to better determine the role of merit in perpetuating colorblind and race-neutral ideologies in the selective admissions process through personal statement writing, instruction, and assessment.

In this paper, I analyze the contexts, including legal policies, that have emerged to affect college admissions standards and thus guide personal statement research, instruction, and assessment. I examine the role of merit and race, as they are dominant themes in policies that inform the holistic admissions review of RMAs. Furthermore, I discuss practices that currently characterize the duties of practitioners (e.g., teachers, school counselors, admissions counselors), with consideration to supporting practitioners to understand critical literacy practices of RMAs. Finally, I conclude that the limited research on the personal statement suggests critical gaps in the field of higher education and college access of RMAs.

The purpose of this literature review is to identify theories, policies, and practices that currently characterize the research, instruction, and evaluative processes of personal statements from the perspective of merit, race, and racism. This article uses current theory and practice in the genre of personal statements for research, policy, and practice. Due to the limited amount of research on this specific topic, literature from the past four decades, from the 1980s through 2020, are included. This review crosses disciplinary boundaries, including law, sociology, anthropology, English, and higher education, as well as theory, such as college-choice theory (CCT), critical race theory (CRT), and critical literacy theory (CLT). The following key questions structure this review:

- Why are merit and race key concerns in the selective admissions process?
- How are merit and racism defined in the context of the personal statement?
- What policies are implemented in college admissions research and practice to address merit and race?
- How might RMAs be supported from a racial inclusion perspective when writing their personal statements?

Defining Merit, Racism, and the Personal Statement

How are merit and racism defined in the context of the personal statement? Admissions counselors make assessments of an applicant's potential for collegiate academic success, talent, and character through objective and subjective merit (Bastedo et al., 2019). Objective merit is defined as a culminating criteria of an applicant's academic accomplishment, including high school grades, rank, and standardized test scores (i.e., SAT and ACT), which can be evaluated using a rank order measure (Park & Liu, 2014). Subjective merit refers to the evaluation of achievements or experiences that cannot be objectively assessed, including letters of recommendations and personal statements written by candidates (Warren, 2013). Bastedo et al. (2019) refer to personal statements as a non-cognitive factor, which confounds the inclusion of the personal statement as a sign of cognitive merit.

With personal statement writing, interrogating merit means examining why and how writing the personal statement can be unjust for some applicants. There may be important admission

criteria related to race, class, gender, or other intersectional factors that may have an impact on assessed merit. Rosinger et al. (2020) state, “in pursuing academic quality, institutions may turn to test scores and other metrics that could threaten access and equity” (p. 19). Interrogating merit increases our understanding of the selective admissions process, which is made selective due to enrollment benefits and graduation advantages (e.g., economic returns) (Karabel, 2005). Applicants’ merit is weighed and assessed. However, the rubric for evaluation varies according to subjective definition of merit in place in the admission office policies (Karabel, 2005). Conceptualizing merit allows for a methodical analysis of existing policies in admissions and for recommendations for improvement.

In this article, racism refers to “individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on demographically minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequality; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons” (Harper, 2012, p. 10). In conceptualizing the personal statement as a form of merit assessment, the emphasis is on assisting researchers and practitioners in critiquing the educational and racial dimensions of privilege and marginalization as it pertains to collegiate access. Thus, I discuss racism through manifestations of colorblindness and race-neutrality ideology. I use colorblindness and race-neutrality synonymously. Bonilla-Silva (2006) characterizes colorblindness as a form of racial category that does not hinder or restrict opportunities of individuals or groups. Carbado and Harris (2008) discuss race neutrality through legal policies that reject racial discrimination in an effort to promote racial equality. Research has illustrated colorblindness and race-neutrality achieve contrary outcomes to their theoretical and definitional intentions (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Ward, 2020).

Placing Merit and Race at the Forefront in Personal Statement Writing

Race and merit must be addressed in selective admissions processes because evidence indicates an intersection between education, race, and preparedness for composing a personal statement, as well as other elements of college access (Carbado & Harris, 2008). Research on RMAs’ writing of the personal statement is limited, and focuses on diverse applicant populations in terms of socio-economic class (Jones, 2013), (dis)ability (Vidali, 2007), and conceptualization of the personal statement writing process (Aukerman & Beach, 2018). Paley (1996) first introduced the idea of the personal statement as a rhetorical tightrope, wherein students must balance description, exposition, and analysis, as their writing is evaluated by an invisible audience. This function of the personal statement led researchers to uncover the connections between race, self-disclosure, expectations, and successful personal statements.

The responses of researchers and practitioners to the writing approaches by RMAs in the past three decades of research suggest disconnects between research, practice, and legal policy (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Warren, 2013). Research does not holistically address race and merit in RMA applications. For example, Aukerman and Beach (2018) offered a new perspective on approaches students use to conceptualize the writing process, including task conceptualization, consideration of audience, and thinking through how they view themselves as writers; however, the paper remained focused on the personal statement as a writing task devoid of other influences, including legislative changes that affect attention to diverse populations, such as *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003).

In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Grutter v. Bollinger* stipulated that higher education institutions could use race, among other variables (e.g., class and gender), to support diverse access of minoritized applicants (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003, 539 U.S. 306). Research on personal statement writing and assessment became racially charged with the responsibility of incorporating the consideration of race, among other factors, such as class, gender, and ability. This was a call for researchers and practitioners to consider the critical importance of diversity in college access. Carbado and Harris (2008) urged researchers and practitioners not to interpret the ruling as a policy to enforce colorblindness and race neutrality. In personal statement writing, enforcing race neutrality would mean erasing racial references from RMAs essay content, effectively voiding their story of any racial meaning. Critical literacy advocates assert that RMAs' racial identities are so deeply intersected with race in that reading and writing of their own stories would not make sense without any reference to race (Emdin, 2010; Love, 2014; Morrell, 2007). Race is key to RMAs' efforts at writing a compelling statement displaying merit (Carbado & Harris, 2008).

Race has become a central factor of many higher education policies and research (Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Warikoo, 2016). Some studies have begun to focus on race in the context of the personal statement (Jones, 2013; Vidali, 2007). Jones (2013) showed that class status has a measurable impact on access to valuable internships to be included as experience on personal statements (Jones, 2013). Vidali (2007) portrayed how applicants with disabilities navigated the writing process to reframe disability from a burden to a motivator. Bastedo et al. (2019) examined how admissions counselors evaluated personal statements while also considering SAT scores and other applicant factors, such as race. Bastedo et al. (2019) found evaluators were not more likely to select applicants who illustrated elements of grit and personal growth in their personal statements. Warren (2013) studied whether RMAs could improve at writing the personal statement if they were taught how to navigate the rhetorical situation and make persuasive arguments when writing the personal statement. Warren's (2013) results showed that a persuasive argument "draws on the shared values of writer and audience" (p. 47). As such, race and culture are entwined in the writing and reading of personal statements. Furthermore, this understanding of values and expectations in personal statement writing could be taught to RMAs to improve the portrayal of their admission merit.

The personal statement is one of many tools to learn applicants' strengths, including perseverance and showing a maturing mindset (Bastedo et al., 2019). However, Kirkland and Hansen (2011) did not see the personal statement as a viable tool to detect racial preferences in the admissions process. Kirkland and Hansen (2011) argued applicants' stories if based on their personal experiences, may be general enough as not to possess racial identifiers. The implication is the personal statement is useful for applicants, racially minoritized or not, to disclose stories. However, it holds little to no merit as a tool that does not support or harm RMAs' admissions prospects.

It is important to highlight the degree to which an applicant's race is important to RMAs' college access, as evident in a variety of U.S. Supreme Court cases related to affirmative action in higher education (e.g., *Bakke v. California*, 1978 *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Fisher v. Texas et al.*, 2016). The goal of affirmative action is to diversify the student body to ensure the inclusion of populations that have been excluded in the past (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Ward, 2020). The impetus to fundamentally transform instructional and evaluative practices of personal statements has been left mostly uninformed. However, new legislative rulings (e.g., *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v.*

Harvard, 2019) and shifting applicant demographics provide for a continued discussion on the evaluation of RMAs' personal statements, which allocates race at the forefront of RMAs' college access in the context of merit. A paradox of current inclusion policies is that the effects of colorblindness and race-neutrality could be harmful for RMAs, even if their intent is to ensure racial equality in college access (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Warikoo, 2016; Ward, 2020).

Racial Preferences in Selective College Admissions

Selective college admission is a field of practice and research that interrogates the association between merit and race in the broader struggle for equal access to higher education (Arcidiacono et al., 2020; Bastedo et al., 2019; Espenshade et al., 2004; Karabel, 2005; Park & Liu, 2014; Posselt et al., 2012; Rosinger et al., 2020; Warikoo, 2016). The selective college admission process is understood as a merit-based process where applicants' scholastic and extracurricular engagements and their self-presentations are evaluated for their entry (Bastedo et al., 2019).

Selective college admission also serves as a space for RMAs' struggle for equal access to higher education (Karabel, 2005; McCleary-Gaddy & Miller, 2018; Warikoo, 2016). Research in selective college admission has revealed evidence of racial preferencing (Espenshade & Chung, 2005; Karabel, 2005; Park & Liu, 2014). Conceptually, studies on the role of race in the selective college admission field show that applicants' demographics are an important strategic consideration in admissions counselors' evaluative process (e.g., due to pressure to meet institution goals, such as revenue and prestige) (Espenshade & Chung, 2005; Park & Liu, 2014; Ward, 2020; Warikoo, 2016). These studies also convey that inequalities in admissions stem from discrepancies between Whites and RMAs, and this concern can be interrogated by targeting race as a key factor in the selective college admission process (Park & Liu, 2014; McClary-Gaddy & Miller, 2018; Rosinger et al., 2020; Ward, 2020; Warikoo, 2016). In advocating for a racial analysis of selective college admission process, these studies seek to show "admission to elite colleges and universities in the United States is not now and never has been based solely on academic merit" (Espenshade et al., 2005, p. 1422).

For example, Posselt et al. (2012) showed that enrollment disparities of RMAs, such as Hispanics and African Americans, persisted despite achievement gains made by these applicants in academic preparation over time. Rosinger et al. (2020) demonstrated that subjective admissions criteria (i.e., extracurricular involvement, interviews, letters of recommendation, and the personal statement) were initially developed to increase access to selective colleges for talented students from racially minoritized and low-income backgrounds, but in practice may do little to improve access and may possibly intensify existing inequalities. Rosinger et al. (2020) and Posselt et al. (2012) acknowledge the existence of racial stratification in selective admissions. Rosinger et al. (2020) and Posselt et al. (2012) also recognize the need to continue to explore the value of academic and nonacademic indicators of both merit and racism. Given the advances in evidence-based educational practices to prepare RMAs for a subjective evaluation of their merit, their continued under-representation suggests that the conditions for admissions to selective institutions may play a role in hindering more equal enrollment outcomes for RMAs.

Fundamentally, admissions policies or programs' ability to affect applicants' opportunities is important. Policies do create change. Espenshade and Chung (2005) developed a probabilistic simulation of RMAs' admissions prospects to indicate the opportunity costs for institutions that intend to ignore race in the evaluation process. The simulation showed acceptance rates for

African American applicants fell from 33.7% to 12.2%, leading to a drop of 9.0% to 3.3% of African Americans in the admittance class (Espenshade & Chung, 2005). Similarly, the acceptance rates and admission of Hispanics roughly halved. The opportunity cost is important for higher education institutions to consider. This is because fewer students will matriculate to alumni on a campus where they are not racially represented (Espenshade & Chung, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006). Thus, ignoring race can pose a concern for institutional recruitment goals as opposed to seeing racial diversity as a moral and social necessity, which would place merit and race at center stage.

Studies that radically critique the role of race show tensions among applicants have manifested through idealized race or race-based arguments, which validate the analysis of race in research and practice context (Park & Liu, 2014; Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Ward, 2020). For instance, Park and Liu (2014) demonstrated that the interests of colleges and universities both converge and diverge with RMAs' effort to seek enrollment at those institutions, based on critical mass. Using Asian American and Pacific Islanders as racially minoritized population under study, the researchers explain Asian American and Pacific Islanders' acceptance or rejection is mediated by how their academic merit is interpreted by attendance quotas of critical mass, showing the active role of selective admission policy in idealizing or disparaging the role of race in applicants' college access.

Warikoo (2016) serves as a specific example of how historically prestigious institutions (viz., Harvard, Brown, and Oxford) have promoted their diversity rhetoric to achieve a bargain for diversity in programming efforts. Whereas Brown's administrative rhetoric explicitly recognized race as a dimension of power inequality and racial differences as a positive enrichment of campus experience, Harvard frames diversity through a broad cultural identity that includes race among other intersectional identities, such as extracurricular talents, religion, and worldviews. Each view of diversity reflects how each institution seeks to attract applicants. Yet, in exploring the effects of these rhetorical promotional views espoused by elite institutions, Warikoo (2016) found that White applicants also applied their own diversity bargain by allocating greater consideration to the institution whose diversity rhetoric is presumed to help them maintain their advantage (e.g., diversity rhetoric emphasizing individual talent and worldview as diversity, as opposed to the historical oppression of racial minorities). Warikoo (2016) illustrated a more nuanced understanding of merit and race through rhetorical diversity framing and initiatives and how applicants see institutional colorblindness and race neutrality as being associated with access.

Conceptualizations of merit and race in the field of selective college admission has exposed the association between educational and legal dimensions of race and access. There is still limited attention to challenging a colorblind ideology and approach to evaluating and instructing RMAs on how to effectively disclose their stories (Wight, 2017). However, the field of selective college admission has contributed to our understanding about what it means to be identified as a RMA by connecting practices of higher education institutions to the ideals of diversity and influence of legal legislations that impact the selective admissions process. Overall, a more nuanced conceptualization of merit, race, and college access is needed to further explore racial preferences in the selective admissions process.

College-Choice Theory

A theoretical discourse relevant to conceptualizing merit and race in the context of personal statement writing is CCT. With its emphasis on students' trajectory to higher education and reasons for the lack thereof, CCT has contributed to the understanding of the role of merit and race in college access, identifying ways the personal statement could be used as a tool to understand college access. Perna (2006) asserted, "although college completion is critical to fully realizing the public and private benefit of higher education and achieving equity in higher education opportunity, degree attainment is not possible without 'college choice'" (p. 148).

CCT explains that students' decisions surrounding institution choice and enrollment is grounded in personal background factors (e.g., race, class, ability, religion, etc.), academic achievement (i.e., grades and standardized test scores), and extracurricular interests and factors associated with college selection (e.g., college cost, access to financial aid, geographic location, etc.) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Rodriguez et al., 2020). Further, CCT also makes possible the critique of research and enrollment practices that could lead to stratification of access based on race (Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018; McDonough et al., 1997; Museus, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2020). Hence, RMAs' trajectory to higher education can be understood as complicated by race, among other intersecting forms of struggle, in light of institutional goals and demand (Perna, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2020). College choice theorists who focus on race have suggested that college-choice processes need to do more to promote and support the college-going pathways of RMAs (Comeaux et al., 2020; McDonough et al., 1997; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

CCT has further illuminated the college-going pathways of RMAs by suggesting the process is not linear for every applicant, and race may affect the factors that influence the steps in the process (Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018; McDonough et al., 1997; Rodriguez et al., 2020). For example, Kim and Gasman (2011) explored Asian Americans' social networks in their college-choice decisions to include reliance on information from media (e.g., U.S. News rankings) when the impact of information received from people, including guidance counselors, family or peers possessed limited information on how to guide them. McDonough et al. (1997) offered a view that factors associated with African-American students' decisions to attend college should also consider institution type, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as religion and athletics recruitment. For Chicana feminist researchers, such as Dache-Gerbino et al. (2018), the emphasis on Latina collegiate access shows the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. Dache-Gerbino et al. (2018) interrogated race, class, and gender, as intersecting systems that perpetuate racist, classist, and sexist ideologies and practices through the marketing of proprietary institutions (e.g., for-profit colleges). Dache-Gerbino et al. (2018) concluded that "these factors account for an environment that implicitly puts Latina students from working-class families at higher risk of believing the dangling carrot as an unbiased college choice" (p. 56). The conceptualization and inclusion of race in CCT research is raising admission's awareness of RMAs' pathways to college, which leads to more racially responsive practices.

However, CCT can be critiqued for the extent to which it reveals the impact of race without considering the manner in which race is examined relevant to experiences of educational disruption (Rodriguez et al., 2020) and to broader systems of marginalization (Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018). According to Rodriguez et al. (2020), CCT could do more to account for changes in contexts, such as students' forced migration from high schools in Puerto Rico to Florida due to the impact of Hurricane Maria. Not only was geographic displacement stressful on students' schooling efforts, Florida's education policy context (as an English only state with English-only

testing) further challenged students' dispositions toward college based on the increased barrier in obtaining high school degrees. Whereas students from higher class statuses were fluent in English and unlikely to change their collegiate aspirations, the level of uncertainty increased for lower-income counterparts. This conception of college access, race, class, and mobility remains largely unexplored despite "increasingly common [occurrence of student mobility] as a result of natural disasters, migration due to political conflict, and policies such as school choice" (p. 20).

The critique of CCT by recent articles (e.g., Dache-Gerbino et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020) has important implications for the research, policy, and practice of admissions counselors for equal access to higher education. Admissions counselors who intend to support RMAs' college-choice decisions must be aware and understand the operation of race, including its intersectionality to other features of dispositions, such as class, gender, linguistics, and geographic mobility, that shape merit and race in the context of college access. RMAs' lived experiences are so deeply rooted in their race that any effort to understand their journey to college would be incomplete if admissions practices were to strike race from any of these applicants' college materials (Carbado & Harris, 2008).

Critical Race Theory

CRT is a current research paradigm used to address merit and race. CRT emerged as a form of opposition scholarship based on the work of critical legal researchers to address issues of social justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1998), including equal opportunity in higher education (Comeaux et al., 2020; Ward, 2020; Waterman, 2013). Centralizing race and racism as being endemic to U.S. society allowed CRT theorists to address the limited progression of critical legal scholarship and directly argue that additional critical race research needs to be done to limit the impact on racially minoritized populations (Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Proponents of CRT argue there is an imperative to understand race and challenge racism and its operation through theory, policy, and practices in U.S. society (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This imperative also includes analyzing RMAs' experiences of subordination as observed through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) states "Indeed, racism and its intersection with other forms of subordination shape the experiences of People of Color very differently than Whites...CRT adds to efforts to continue to expand this dialogue to recognize the ways in which our struggles for social justice are limited by discourses that omit and thereby silence the multiple experiences of People of Color" (p. 72).

Solorzano (1998) presents CRT through five tenets that address its mission, purpose, operation, and usefulness to conducting research and practice critical to the subordination of people of color:

- The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination—CRT acknowledges that race and racism is racialized through layers of subordinations with class, gender, immigration status, sexuality, etc.
- The challenge to dominant ideology—CRT challenges perspectives of White privilege, meritocracy, and other forms of colorblindness, including notions of objective/neutral researcher positionalities, and deficit research that silences the voices of People of Color.
- The commitment to social justice—CRT believes in the interest convergence of social justice missions, including the liberation of oppression by oppressed

classes, genders, sexes, and other marginalized groups, in addition to those racially oppressed.

- The centrality of experiential knowledge—CRT sees the experiences and lived experiences of People of Color as powerful and critical for political resistance and research-based teaching about oppression. It emphasizes the histories and stories of People of Color.
- The transdisciplinary perspective—CRT extends beyond the binary perspective of race and racism to include scholarship from history, sociology, anthropology, education, gender studies, etc.

Comeaux et al. (2020) used the CRT tenet of the centrality of experiential knowledge to problematize the lack of focus on race and racism by the University of California system. In analyzing the University of California's (UC) admissions policies and practices for African American applicants, the researchers found high-achieving African American students' were confused by their admission to other elite institutions (e.g., Harvard and MIT) but rejection from high ranking UC campuses (i.e., UC Berkeley and UCLA). Participants raised the question of being underrepresented in top ranking UC institutions, and expressed feeling uncomfortable by the campus environment and how campus officials and students exhibited concern on issues related to Black lives and the restricted compositional diversity system-wide while no UC institution had greater than 6% of African American freshman enrollees (Comeaux et al., 2020). For Comeaux et al. (2020), CRT enabled high achieving African American applicants to use their own voices to describe their discomfort in racial terms, and describe how race, racism, and merit deeply intersect within the college admissions process.

It is possible RMAs play a role in reinforcing racist ideologies through merit as they attempt to advance their own narrative. Ward (2020) shows this paradox in pointing out the pervasiveness of racism in one MRA plaintiff group's colorblind ideology in *Student for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* (2019). SFFA's colorblind arguments emphasized class over race, viewed Asian Americans as a homogeneous population, and showed that SFFA and Harvard positioned themselves on opposite sides of the argument regarding the use of merit as a gatekeeping tool. In this case, SFFA's colorblind arguments equated to using civil rights arguments to promote anti-affirmative action. Similarly, Poon and Segoshi (2018) showed how Asian American groups idealized race in *Fisher v. Texas* (2016) case. Asian Americans chose their position on affirmative action in college applications depending on whether they saw themselves as a disfavored racial minority harmed by affirmative action to the benefit of other minorities or saw themselves as aligned with Hispanics, African Americans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders due to race-related disparities in education and daily life (Poon & Segoshi, 2018). Critical race theory illuminates these paradoxes and self-defeating patterns by observing racial interactions from outside of traditional racial conceptions. To use CRT to inform admission policies, racially minoritized applicants' voices and experiences need to be heard first-hand, and without scrubbing race from their narrative. Race is central to the story RMAs tell in a personal statement because it is central to the applicant.

If we are to take a CRT approach to understanding the personal statements of RMAs, we should remain aware that what RMAs do not share about race may be equally as informative as the stories they disclose. If RMAs do not choose to write stories about race, could it be because race is simply a more general feature? Or, is it because colorblind ideology has permeated their understanding of race as a non-significant feature of their identity? Answers to these questions are the first steps to equality. Poon and Segoshi (2018) stated:

Because “race does ideological and political work” through the process of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 111), it is important to understand how and why stakeholders, like AAPIs, are engaged in racial work to determine who can access selective institutions. (p. 260)

Few articles on personal statement research acknowledge inequality based on racial difference, and even fewer include an analysis of hierarchical or systemic difference of privilege and marginalization based on race. Since the dilemma of colorblindness is intersected with merit in the selective college admission process (Comeaux et al., 2020; Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Ward, 2020), RMAs’ navigation of the admissions process is complicated by race in a race-less merit system. Higher education studies that use CRT as a theoretical lens help us to build the argument for prioritizing the role of race in the context of the selective college admission process.

Critical Literacy Theory

Selective universities rely on merit-based arguments for evaluation, such as standardized literacy test scores. However, cultural and social differences lead to different manifestations of literacy (Emdin, 2010; Lammers & Van Alstyne, 2018; Love, 2014). CLT emerged out of the need to resist dominant practices in literacy education with regard to reading and writing instruction (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). In addition, CLT extends the meaning of literacy beyond the ability to read and write, to include the evaluation of texts to understand the association between power, privilege, and oppression (Giroux, 1983; Morrell, 2007). A definition of CLT is provided by Morrell (2007), “critical literacies involve the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations; and promoting individual freedom and expression” (p. 214).

CLT illuminates the power dynamic between dominant and marginalized populations by examining non-traditional literary ways that marginalized groups seek to empower themselves (Larson et al., 2017; Love, 2014; Moje, 2000). In the past two decades, CLT scholarship has centered on racially minoritized youths’ critical literacy practices, from the view of cultural relevance (Avila, 2012; Comber, 2014; Emdin, 2010; Love, 2014; Morrell, 2007). Critical literacy scholarship presents alternate mediums to access applicants’ ability to express themselves, a primary component of literacy and of evaluation for admission (Avila, 2012; Comber, 2014).

CLT is a reciprocal education model, with participants and researchers working together to empower RMAs with the ability to successfully represent themselves through a personal statement. Critical literacy can therefore lead to changes and interventions in the current admission model at selective universities (Emdin, 2010). The intent of CLT is to leverage cooperation between marginalized people and allies with critical awareness to impact dominant power structures to help those marginalized to liberate themselves (Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970). Critical awareness is the first step toward critical literacy, and White applicants use current understanding of racial equality language to better their own position in applications (Warikoo, 2016). It is important that RMAs are also able to think critically about their own cultural influences on their literacy.

The incorporation of CLT to understand RMAs’ voices and marginalized lived experiences stems from critically using literacy practices to address concerns in youths’ communities and to enact transformative change. Moje (2000) documented Hispanic gangster youths’ use of graffiti as a tool to create their space for belonging. African American youths also demonstrated

resistance toward prevailing racial stereotypes and biases that affect their communities, including drug use and violence. Love (2014) conveyed ways that Black youths have sought to dispel these myths by storyboards, music, poetry, and moviemaking. Winn (2010) also helped to push the boundaries of CLT beyond what we traditionally understand as out-of-school learning setting. The inclusion of previously incarcerated girls' lived experiences, through their involvement in a theater group, showed that what we understand as resistance and empowerment is different for each racially minoritized groups and the situations they face. Finally, Bishop (2014) addressed recommendations for ways in which youths can combat racial inequality by engaging in political intervention with the support of mentors. Direct political intervention, such as protesting, is another way in which CLT has brought youth advocates' voices to the forefront.

Critical literacy practices have only begun to be considered alongside personal statement research (Wight, 2017). Wight (2017) is an example of a literacy study that focused on RMAs' personal statement writing processes. Wight (2017) emphasized one bi-racial Asian/Latino applicant's negotiation of the personal statement writing process. In the study, the applicant's effort to appeal to his audience by describing depictions of poverty included stereotypical portrayals (e.g., the creaking sound of the floor and the infestation of insects). Although Wight (2017) did not identify this writer's practice as a form of critical literacy, her observation of his practice was critical as she noted he contributed to inequality by marginalizing himself and others living in subsistence situations through reproducing stereotypes of poverty. If RMAs adopt dominant, mainstream White-based literacy practices, these applicants risk a perception of "selling out" by acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

A primary limitation of CLT research involves critical literacy practices of RMAs that may unintentionally perpetuate racist ideologies toward other RMAs. Paris and Alim (2014) demonstrated that CLT has not always looked inward to reflect and address its own contradictory elements. Paris and Alim (2014) asked what should occur when or if literacies become illiteracies? The researchers suggested the possibility of racially minoritized youths' critical literacy practices (re)producing inequalities, rather than dismantling them. By voicing their literary practices in a certain way, they are also reinforcing the association of their race with those literary practices. CLT research can take on valuable meaning, but it can neglect to recognize the paradoxical effects on the power relations that its practices can exacerbate. In the context of the personal statement, prioritizing marginalized' voices and lived experiences can be an ineffective way to remediate racial inequality in the admissions process, especially if some racially minoritized groups are pitting their racial identities against others in the competition for meritorious admissions (Poon & Segoshi, 2018; Ward, 2020).

CLT research has the potential to contribute to personal statement research by being a lens through which researchers and admissions counselors can interrogate the interconnecting function of merit and race, as well as examine the ways that critical literacy practices paradoxically inform our understanding of racism. Studies like Wight (2017) reinforced Paley's (1996) claim that the personal statement functions as a rhetorical paradox for applicants, where either inclusion or exclusion of minority status can both harm and help an applicant. For RMAs' writing the personal statement, they may even feel on display in a "freak show," as discussed by Vidali (2007). Could this process of engaging in self-deprecatative acts, which harm other RMAs, reflect Freire's (1970) process where the oppressed inevitably becomes the oppressor in the process of becoming critically literate? The importance of CLT extends beyond its emphasis on resistance and empowerment for RMAs, into a position among the broader socio-racial,

educational, and legal contexts. In the context of personal statements, CLT can broaden our understanding of what counts as meritorious literacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This literature review evaluated the research on the role of merit and race in personal statement writing for college access. This study concludes that merit and race are deeply intersected through the expectation for enforcing colorblindness and race-neutrality in admission practices alongside traditional objective merit, such as test scores. However, there is not enough research to indicate the extent to which RMAs are aware of the intersection, or how it affects their identity disclosures. This review's findings underscore the need for coordinated efforts to combine theory and practice to recognize that merit is not race neutral and to address evaluative and instructional approaches to support RMAs' stories, which may contain experiences that are central to their racial identity.

Researchers should work closely with practitioners to understand that merit is not, and has never been, colorblind. Practitioners must move beyond the focus that academic achievement, based on rank-ordered numerical values, is the only way to define merit. The convergence and divergence of higher education institutional goals hides racial preference with colorblind rhetoric and policy (Park & Liu, 2014; Ward, 2020). If diversity and equality are to be emphasized in practitioners' work, then it is not possible to comprehend RMAs' identity-based stories if practitioners do not recognize that these experiences are grounded in their racial identities.

Researchers should develop ways to use the personal statement effectively in recruiting RMAs. Task conceptualization and the desire to appeal to readers may be achieved differently by RMAs than by their White middle-class counterparts. In addition, research on personal statement writing illustrates the personal statement behaves as an oppressive tool for applicants (Vidali, 2007). In some cases, pressure to perform may be a problem (Vidali, 2007). In other cases, the scrubbing of racial features may make any RMA story ineffective (Carbado & Harris, 2008), and including them could reinforce stereotypes (Wight, 2017).

From a critical literacy and CRT perspective, writing the personal statement could be seen as a process where the individuals are attempting to facilitate cross-racial dialogue on race and race-based experiences associated with their college-choice processes, while colleges and universities behave as chameleons that change color based on their diversity goals and other institutional interests. If the personal statement is an important way for admissions counselors to put a face to scholastic achievements, then viewing the collegiate aspirations of RMAs from the angle of their college-choice processes must be a part of admissions counselors' conceptualization of how RMAs may approach writing this task. The lack of knowledge on critical literacy practices in personal statement writing can prohibit admissions counselors from realizing RMAs may have their own race-based expressions used for identity disclosure. Critical literacy training for admission counselors can facilitate their understanding of where RMAs stories come from, and what they have achieved (Carbado & Harris, 2008) as opposed to seeing diversity as an approach to gain pity for admittance (Kirkland & Hansen, 2011).

The significance of race-based narratives for minoritized individuals could point to further instructional opportunities for teachers. Being critically conscious of racial violence in literacy instruction is a must (Young, 2020). For example, if a teacher were to suggest to a student that their race-based experience in the personal statement was stereotypical, this teacher could do more to engage in self-reflection to uncover whether this opinion was bias or whether it was

grounded in the students' own literacy practice. A teachers' instruction to change linguistic habits could be racially prejudiced, even if the intent was not prejudicial. Teaching students to use the full range of their personal rhetorical skills is one way to re-conceptualize instruction on writing the personal statement. Educational goals include helping RMAs revise through reasoning through their own rhetorical choices to convey their literacy and aptitude for college education. These suggestions are some steps to begin using the personal statement as a tool of empowerment.

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