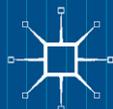


# **BLACK SUBJECTS IN AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORAS**

**RACE AND GENDER IN  
RESEARCH AND WRITING**

**EDITED BY BENJAMIN TALTON AND  
QUINCY T. MILLS**



# Black Subjects in Africa and Its Diasporas

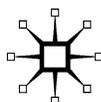
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BLACK SUBJECTS IN AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORAS

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## Race and Gender in Research and Writing in Africa and Its Diasporas: An Introduction

*Benjamin Talton and Quincy T. Mills*

The travel journals of scholars, writers, and activists who have conducted research in Africa and its diasporas could fill a library. Researchers, even with the best of intentions, by definition invade people's lives and spaces. When they check into a hotel, ride a people mover (local bus), go to a market, or sit in someone's home, they get observed and marked by local communities. These markers run the spectrum from diasporic kin, to Western other, to woman-out-of-place. These experiences are often not part of the intended research, so they get stored away as interesting stories from the field. By casting aside these experiences with blackness and gender in the field, scholars run the risk of marginalizing the very people they intend to write about. *Black Subjects in Africa and Its Diasporas* shifts the terrain of research in Africa and the black diasporas from fact-finding expeditions to more dialogic exchanges that shape intellectual conversations and contributions. It advocates that scholars recast the core of their study from objects to subjects. Yet, the idea of subject takes a dialectical turn in this volume. It places two subjects—researcher and host—at the center of the analysis. On the one hand, the concept of subject or subjectivity means everything and nothing at the same time. At a basic level, everyone is a subject and has subjectivity. While relations of power have marked some as objects, that power is not absolute. Regardless of what researchers learn or know from their informants, they have just as much power to make researchers the objects of inquiry.

On the other hand, the currency behind the concept of subject as opposed to object is that it recognizes the collaborative process of inquiries of the complexities of the human condition. As objects of study, people—their ideas, lived experiences, imaginings, perceptions, and ideologies—get transformed into sources. As such, they become metaphorically marked for the archive in preparation to become artifacts. The hegemonic project of turning people into sources is closely tied with the often-used phrase “giving voice to the voiceless.” A more collaborative research process would recognize the shared inquiries of the researcher and the host.<sup>1</sup> Notions of race, class, and gender shape the interactions of researchers and hosts in critical ways, and expose their different meanings according to cultural and geographic context, which force researchers to adjust to local conceptions.

Stuart Hall, for example, advocates a rethinking of a shared blackness. He does not seek to dismiss or undermine it but to expose its rich dynamism and complexity. There are a diversity of experiences and cultures that have been thrust under this collective, and masculine, “black” category. To unpack these experiences and home in on their fundamental differences carries significant consequences, which include, as Hall contends, the “fading of the notion that ‘race’ or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the effectivity of any cultural practice or determine any final sense of its aesthetic value.”<sup>2</sup> It also brings to the surface the fact that a great deal of the politics of the African and African diasporan world have been constructed, addressed, and developed directly in relation to questions of a shared black experience.<sup>3</sup> Accounting for the collaborations of black subjects helps to complicate racial and gender affinities in Africa and its diasporas.

Michelle Wright understands “Black subjectivity as *that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real*, or in theoretical terms, between the ideal and the material (emphasis in the original).”<sup>4</sup> She takes a “diasporic approach to black subjectivity” that is recognizable to other black communities, yet offers some specificity. By engaging African diasporic theories of subjectivity, through counterdiscourses, she provides an exciting framework to complicate blackness as a diasporan identity, one that includes black female subjects. The antiesentialist imperative is well acknowledged in the field. Essentializing blackness is a masculine project where gender and sexuality get devalued for the sake of privileging race. Indeed, the literature on diaspora is slowly moving away from its masculine framing. This is not to say that diaspora has historically been a male domain, but rather that

scholars have focused more on the dispersal, migration, and travel of men. Feminist scholars, however, have led the way in gendering the African diaspora.<sup>5</sup> These discussions of blackness, gender, sexuality, class, and diaspora in this volume are connected to the worldview of African diasporan subjects, which scholars attempt to understand and synthesize.

Scholars have written extensively on the theories, frameworks, and geographies of the African diaspora, but few have connected these advances to the particulars of social science research methods.<sup>6</sup> Historian Kim Butler, for example, has advocated for greater recognition of the diversity within the category of African diaspora, even beyond its three recognized main branches—the Afro-Atlantic, Afro-Asian, and the African national. Diasporan study is defined, she argues, by the research questions that scholars ask to “allow for comparative study of different diasporas.”<sup>7</sup> She not only offers key dimensions in diasporan studies, but she is also reflexive in her work on Brazil. During research in Sao Paulo and Salvador, Butler realized her “construction of ‘blackness,’ based on my United States perspective, was not universally shared around the Afro-Atlantic diaspora.” The “racial identity of blackness” held very different meanings to these two Afro-Brazilian communities. If blackness carries varied meanings across the diaspora, then, as Butler suggests, we “need to develop conceptual constructs that address the specific concerns of African diaspora studies.”<sup>8</sup> Where better to look than in African diaspora communities?

The chapters in this book are built around narratives and analyses from individual scholars of diverse backgrounds, fields, and research foci; each share what this book argues is the most fruitful aspect of research travel, where preconceived notions collide with the realities of living and working within research sites and navigating the thorny issues of race, gender, and class. The sparring between prejudices and experiences in their analyses forces scholars to reevaluate their research methodologies and social theories. For the anthropologists, historians, and political scientists in this volume, the United States is their point of departure for fieldwork, but not necessarily their native land. These eleven scholars, with origins in five different nations, reflect upon research in and analyses of ten different countries. Their research covers Africa (Angola, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique), the Caribbean (the Bahamas, Trinidad, and Cuba), South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Chile), and North America (Canada and the United States). They examine their processes of researching

black diasporan communities when their methods, strategies, and preconceived notions of blackness confront the social realities of these communities, and vice versa. Collectively, these chapters unveil the process of discovery, which is most often relegated to footnotes and, somewhat less often, to the acknowledgments section of monographs. The resulting impression from such short shrifting of the research process, largely by form, is an unencumbered smoothness and control.

This book examines how black subjects—researchers and hosts—understand and negotiat blackness as a form of diasporic relations. As Brent Edwards has pointed out, the uses of diaspora are wide and varied. Scholarly interest in black internationalism has centered diaspora as an analytical category in understanding forced and voluntary dispersal, exile, refuge, migration, travel, and transnational political formations, which make the term “open to ideological appropriation in a wide variety of political projects.”<sup>9</sup> We centralize the real and perceived connections played out in the work of diaspora. It makes what Sara Busdiecker calls the “social construction of blackness” a diasporic rendering of connections and contradictions between racial imaginings and local material, political, and social conditions.<sup>10</sup> While these contributors do not see themselves *practicing* diaspora, in its various manifestations, through research travel, they do examine how diaspora was at work as they interacted within their host communities.

Research travel and tourism are often combined, yet the former necessarily casts the researcher as an “outsider” regardless of the research site’s location, by virtue of the information that is sought and the questions that are asked. Research methods demand detachment, but this is often complicated by the researcher’s need to be on the “inside” to gain access to data, to satisfy a personal yearning to belong, or both. Tourism allows greater leeway to construct, or draw on existing, fantasies. While problematic, a tourist can adjust the level to which one engages the “native factor” and can choose to limit personal interactions when the experience becomes undesirable. Yet, research travel is just as elitist as tourism. Scholars have the luxury to visit another city or country to ponder the lives and histories of others for extended periods of time. Since most nonacademics seldom see research as work, host communities often mark researchers as outsiders. These markings are not limited to people who are not natives, but can also include scholars returning home to conduct research.

When scholars set-off on their research travel, they bring with them baggage full of research tools. They travel armed with the latest theories and literature on diasporan communities with bounded or

global frameworks fit for their research questions. They also travel prepared to engage social science research methods—such as ethnography or interviews—to answer those questions or discover new ones. Collecting oral testimonies is a significant part and challenge of the fieldwork experience. While ethnography and oral interviews are interconnected, they often serve very different purposes for social scientists. Oral tradition involves stories, folklore, and past events passed down orally through various generations, which is common among African communities. The oral tradition is not retold by people who were directly involved. Oral history, on the other hand, is the verbal recall of past events often facilitated through an interview with people who have direct knowledge or connections to the historical moment. If simply used as sources, oral tradition and history become static data to be verified. Corroboration and trustworthiness are critical factors of any historical source, but it is much more dynamic to account for how people remember history, which is equally important for written, archival sources. The process of remembering is just as important as the memory.

Interviews about the past, as Benjamin Talton and Dann Broyld indicate in their chapters, do not just reconstruct history. Rather they should also assess present-day perspectives of past events and their current significance. Talton's chapter captures the interview as conversation and its potential to transform a research project and shape the researcher's perceptions of race and gender. His experiences conducting research on the eastern edge of Ghana's Northern Region between 2000 and 2005 included highly informal conversations, the pace and content of which were shaped by his informants. As he demonstrates, the best interviews result from the researcher's clear recognition of the limits of his or her control over the informant and the information they provide. There is also a great benefit in recognizing the sway of exterior factors on the interview process and outcomes. Oral histories are best recognized as dynamic representations, shaped by the material conditions in which they are related.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Quincy Mills acknowledges in his chapter that his lack of attention to the material conditions of African American barbers prevented him from understanding why barbers were hesitant to be interviewed.

Not built into research methods but often recognized in the strategies that researchers embrace in the field are the sacrifices scholars are willing to make in material and principle to achieve their goal of collecting data. An issue not under investigation in Mills research on African American-owned barber shops in the U.S. South was his own

hair, dreadlocks that extended down his back. His hair emerged as a critical issue that might have been avoided had Mills simply asked one of the barbers that he consulted for a haircut. But he was not willing to make that sacrifice. By contrast, Harvey Neptune, or the student through which he creatively describes a particular research experience, surpasses his own self-imposed gender boundaries for the sake of access to precious oral data and comes away with a changed sense of sexuality, color/race and his “homeland’s” national history. Both chapters demonstrate the compromises that scholars make on a daily basis of varying severity while in the field to navigate the social and political aspects of collecting data.

All scholars in the field commit to some level or form of compromise. Sitting and waiting for hours for the opportunity to conduct an interview that may be project-defining, have little significance, or may not take place at all; utilizing less-than-safe modes of transportation to reach far-off towns and villages or eating and sleeping conditions that defy the meanings of comfort are other likely problems. Researchers, particularly graduate students, are most often under considerable time and financial constraints. Rarely, however, are these constraints known or of concern within the host community. Waiting for a visa, a bus, or an elderly informant to complete her lunch can transform the research project in beneficial and often illuminating ways. Other times it can be devastating. These are the ingredients that define fieldwork and make it exciting and rewarding. They are also what make it challenging and potentially limiting in terms of the quantity and quality of data that is gathered, when compared with archival research. In the process, having overcome these challenges in some manner, as each of these chapters demonstrates, scholars leave the field personally altered.

Whether conducting oral research, administering surveys, or acting as a participant-observer, few scholars who have conducted field research would dispute that they gained tremendous insight into themselves and the individuals and groups through whom they acquired access to cultural, historical, and social data: the struggles to find sources; the rigors of living in and travel through rough terrain; and the unexpected obstacles that steer research “off course.” Yet, it is in these off-course deviations that marvelous encounters occur, even when scholars launch their field research with a well-crafted plan. Off course leads to new research questions, reformulations of research hypotheses, and a rethinking of preconceived notions about broader contexts of research, identity, and connections between the two. In

unique and illuminating ways the scholars in this volume reflect upon these moments and spaces. As such, there is a strong social dynamic to the methodologies that scholars employ. They describe relationships with informants that run deeper than oral interviews and guides to historic sites. They present the bonds between researcher and “subject/host” that scholars such as Abdullahi Ibrahim insist are necessary to move ethnography and oral interviews away from their imperialist legacies to be replaced with conversations in which the informants are recognized for their “mastery over local frameworks of interpretation.”<sup>12</sup>

Like to Ibrahim, Yasmin Gunaratnam argues for an analytic framework in which research participants are recognized as active participants. They protect areas of their lives from the researcher’s scrutiny. They question the role and motives of the researcher until they have established a satisfactory level of trust. They serve as a gatekeeper of information.<sup>13</sup> She argues “that researchers have to examine and trace how research is entangled with wider social and historical relations, and involves the ideological construction of the subject of its enquiry. The idea that research is a part of social and historical relations, and produces rather than simply reflects what we research is encapsulated in the conceptualization of research as a discursive practice.”<sup>14</sup> As Neptune’s chapter illustrates, returning home to conduct research does not necessarily guarantee insider status simply because of roots, particularly if the research is oriented in a manner to be consumed in the United States and Europe. The ethical dimensions of scholars living and working as visitors in the houses, communities, and work spaces of others are central to this project. We emphasize that there is a high degree of politics embedded in location that is central to shaping our relationship with research sites and informants. Kwasi Konadu, Judy Anderson, and Lynda Day’s chapters, for example, illustrate the benefits of conducting research on a community as a cultural practitioner within it. Day regards her outsider status as a detriment to accessing the “deep” information essential to her research. She sought to literally transform herself into an “insider” as key to her investigation and emotional desire to belong. Konadu employs a similar method by seeking to acquire the skills of the Akan healer at the heart of his study.

It is most common, however, for scholars to write about their relationships with their research “sites” and “subjects,” in a manner that misconstrues the dynamics of power. Scholars have championed the staging of their relationship with data and the processes of gathering

it in a manner that veils the challenges and limited control that is an integral and natural part of it. Fieldwork, particularly ethnography, is highly particular and personal, but it serves as the basis for comparison and understanding within and across society. Rarely is there a deliberate effort to deceive or falsify the events and processes that make research possible. The language and standards of social science writing have pulled scholars into the trap of highlighting their power and success in the field and downplaying false starts, emotionalisms, and any semblance of anything other than pure objectivity. Most academic scholarship shields itself from exposing the personal discovery and powerlessness that accompany them during field research, lest their objectivity be questioned or they be accused of engaging in personal narrative rather than objective scholarship. Scholars play it safe and conventional with terms such as “research subject,” an ambiguous label for an individual that likely played a host of essential and critical roles in the research process. There are significant limits to representing the complex realities of others through an analysis built in our experiences and training.<sup>15</sup>

Yet our research and analytical lexicons suggest that researchers merely extract data from targeted individuals with little opposition, negotiation, or self-reflection on the part of either party. Contrary to such staged conveyances of power that is the norm in social science literature, the chapters in this volume demonstrate that power over data and the direction of the research project are shared, at times unequally, between the researcher and the host community. Physical and emotional compromises and second guessing are as embedded in field research as the rewards of successful interviews and key cultural observations. We suggest that a more careful accounting of the full research experience will benefit future research, the social sciences, and the ways in which we conceive of and discuss African diasporan communities and their relations with the wider world.

Researchers and hosts occupy an equal standing in the inquiries of the human condition. The interactions and relationships of the researchers with their informants, sites, and data in context permit a deeper exploration of the role that blackness and gender may or may not play. Lynda Day—in Sierra Leone—and Judy Anderson—in Argentina—for example, both arrive in their respective “research sites” confident that their assumed blackness, gender, or both might be passports into black diasporan and African communities. However, their “hosts” fail to stamp those passport pages because of their varied ideas and expectations of diaspora, race, femininity, and general

notions of belonging. Not only do these experiences and interactions advance a broader sense of blackness and belonging, they translate into palpable markers of connection and difference within particular research sites.

This book accounts for the unspoken assumptions of an expected subaltern solidarity based on race and history. That is to say, while much has been written on the social constructions of race and the fragile theory of an imagined collective blackness, on what grounds might an African American female scholar expect insider status among women in Mozambique because of her gender? To what extent would Konadu's Akan ancestry help facilitate his research in Ghana? Indeed, what are the benefits of insider status in terms of the questions asked and access to various forms of information? These questions are inherently dialogical at once between scholar and subject. What is expected, whether articulated or assumed, presupposes a response; an open hand or glaring eye signaling acceptance, rejection, or caution. The identity of these scholars matters because of the organic or imagined connections they had with their informants.

As this book highlights the diversity of experiences and perspectives within Africa and communities of African descent, it also highlights the voices and perspectives of research informants. Its contributors demonstrate a commitment to foregrounding a multiplicity of perspectives and points of view, as opposed to universal truths. As Anne Reef contends, postmodernism is “deeply implicated with the idea of social construction, the notion that many areas of our lives and ourselves—identities, bodies, behaviors, and texts, are the result of social processes and interactions.”<sup>16</sup> Social scientists inevitably bring their disciplinary approaches and personal background together with their prejudices, likes, and dislikes to shape their perspectives. Instructively, Busdiecker and Anderson “looked” for blackness in Latin America. While Busdiecker “did not know there were blacks in Bolivia,” an Afro-Bolivian woman was surprised there were blacks in the United States, indicating an enlightening diasporic dialogue on race. These professional and personal experiences broaden popular notions of blackness and the meanings of diaspora.

Race, gender, and class are potent social and political agents that define researchers' interactions with a community in which they conduct their work. By presenting these experiences in the first-person narrative form, *Black Subjects in Africa and Its Diasporas* seeks to recast diaspora in its plural form, which more fully reflects the historical, cultural, and political realities of communities of African descent.

A unitary, organic African diaspora is, as historian Michael Gomez aptly describes, the “quintessential imagined community, existing as both academic project and social agenda.”<sup>17</sup> Its location, boundaries, and content continue to evolve and remain, as he suggests, a “matter of considerable debate but certainly not far from the verges of scholarly endeavor and political exigency, concomitantly inhabiting realms of the nominal and experiential.”<sup>18</sup> In this volume, for example, Judy Anderson, an African American of Liberian parentage, discusses how Argentines often mistook her for Brazilian. Similarly, Sujatha Fernandes poignantly illustrates here how cross-cultural interactions can lead to “cultural misrecognition.” This misrecognition is informed by the legacies of slavery, imperialism, migration, and refuge. In some cases, such as Canada, black diasporan communities sit silently seething in the towns along the US-Canada border, those who escaped from slavery farther south or fought against it in the British army. These legacies do not automatically determine group identity. In fact, they reveal how “overlapping diasporas” and local political landscapes together inform the ways Africans and people of African descent engage notions of belonging.<sup>19</sup>

Several scholars in this volume set out to examine national identity in their research sites. Jessica Krug’s primary research focuses on how “everyday Angolans” define Angola and what it means to be Angolan (*angolanidade*). She explicates the tension between the Angolan state and society as a consequence of the highly masculine alternatives to *angolanidade* that *povo*—everyday people—assert. She reassesses Angolan nationalism from non-elite actors as opposed to the state. Her chapter presents a rich personal narrative of her time conducting research and navigating the tensions between class, Angolan-ness, and government pressure to assert its own national identity.

Host communities also question blackness and nationhood, particularly of these scholars navigating the African diaspora. The assumptions of what it means to be American continually distracted Anderson from forming authentic, organic relationships with Argentinines of all races. Her active involvement in the daily activities of the women in the communities in which she conducted research brought her an intimate understanding of the daily struggles of black Argentines. She describes the relationship between the perceived absence of black Argentines and how they are hyperexoticized through daily harassment and sexual taunts. Therefore, gender and her perceived American-ness were obstacles for completing her research project.

Scholars' identities as gendered and racialized academics shaped the everyday interactions that mitigated and facilitated access to "data" in their various forms. In turn, these experiences influenced the researchers' conceptions of how their hosts constructed diasporic identities. In other words, the negotiations of subjectivity borne out of scholars' interactions with their hosts are placed in dialogue with scholars' research questions about black diasporan communities. Talton was struck by how he was racialized and boxed into an economic category in contrasting ways by white Americans and the local community in northern Ghana. Similarly, Sujatha Fernandes experienced daily racialized and gendered encounters in Havana that speak to the subtle, unspoken assumptions around women and racial identity in the city, and the ways in which they intersected and clashed with her preconceived notions that she brought with her to the island.

Body politics is a central issue that makes the experience of men and women researchers dissimilar. Anderson, Krug, Day, and Henderson share similar experiences as women moving around the streets of Buenos Aires, Luanda, Freetown, and Maputo amid sexual glances and casual offers of marriage. In many cases, for them, being a woman traveling alone served as a major obstacle to establishing respectful, professional relationships that would facilitate their research. Day, in particular, offers a poignant comparison of her research experiences as a young, single woman in 1981 and a married mother in 1995. Their experiences as women moving through these cities were vastly different from those of their male counterparts. Most of the men in this volume do not express concern for harassment. Although in Neptune's case his protagonist's interviewee insisted that he pose nude for a portrait, the researcher emerges from the incident feeling victorious rather than violated.

Taken together, these chapters demonstrate the diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural black experience. Since the meanings of "blackness" and diaspora are multiple, varied, and profoundly shaped by local context, we move beyond what Stuart Hall calls the innocent notion of "the essential black subject" and deconstruct the baggage-laden notions of "race" and blackness, in favor of a more nuanced view of these terms to include references to the attendant dimension and institutions of class, gender, and ethnicity. Black subjects and black experiences must be presented within their historical, cultural, and political context, with ample space for local perspectives, self-descriptions, and expressions of belonging and

connection—or disconnection as the case may be—to the researcher and subject matter. Presenting these differences, through the experiences of the researcher and their hosts, brings ideas, perspectives, and conclusions from the field into broader conversations about race, gender, and class.

## Notes

1. In this regard, the thinking behind this project is influenced by the ideals of subaltern studies, through which the voices on the social and historical margins are repositioned at the analytical center and every effort is made to allow them to speak for themselves. On analyses and methodologies in subaltern studies and their relevance outside of South Asian Studies, see Florencia E. Mallon, “The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History,” *The American Historical Review*, 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1491–1515; and Frederick Cooper, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” *The American Historical Review*, 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1516–1545.
2. Stuart Hall, “What is the ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 443. See also, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 441–449.
3. Hall, *Critical Dialogues*, 445.
4. Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.
5. *Ibid.*; Judith A. Byfield, LaRay Denzer, and Anthea Morrison, eds., *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women, Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing, eds., *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997); Jacqueline Brown, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Carol Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
6. For early work on the African diaspora see Joseph Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982); Ronald Walters, *Pan-Africanism in the African Diaspora: An Analysis of Modern Afrocentric Political Movements* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997); P. Olanwuche Esedebe, *Pan-Africanism: The Idea of a Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1994). On the geographies of African diaspora study, see Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, ed., *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003); Darlene Clark Hine, Tricia Danielle Keaton, and Stephen Small, ed., *Black Europe and*

- the African Diaspora* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: History Through Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Michael Gomez, *Reversing the Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
7. Kim Butler, "From Black History to Diasporan History: Brazilian Abolition in Afro-Atlantic Context," *African Studies Review*, 43, no. 1, Special Issue on the Diaspora (April 2000): 125–139, 127.
  8. *Ibid.*, 132, 136.
  9. Brent Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text*, 66, 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 54.
  10. Sara Busdiecker, "Where Blackness Resides: Afro-Bolivians and the Spatializing and Racializing of the African Diaspora," *Radical History Review*, 103 (Winter 2009): 105–116.
  11. Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: the Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4, 12.
  12. Abdullahi H. Ibrahim, "The Birth of the Interview: The Thin and the Fat of It," *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*, ed. Luise White, Stephen Miescher, and David William Cohen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).
  13. Yasmin Gunaratnum, *Researching 'Race' and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 89.
  14. *Ibid.*, 7.
  15. John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), ix.
  16. Anne Reef, "African Words, Academic Choices: Re-Representing Interviews and Oral Histories," *History in Africa* 35 (2008): 353–361.
  17. Michael Gomez, "Of Dubois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African Studies," *Journal of Black Studies*, 35, no. 2 (2004): 177.
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  19. Earl Lewis, "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," *The American Historical Review*, 100, no. 3 (1995): 765–787.

## Researching while Black: Interrogating and Navigating Boundaries of Belonging in the Andes

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Beside a pile of oranges laid out on the sidewalk in the bustling Villa Fatima neighborhood of La Paz, a cholita sat waiting to make a sale.<sup>1</sup> She wore the typical bowler hat, with braided hair underneath, and a multilayered pollera skirt like any other cholita one would see in the streets of this and many Bolivian cities, towns, and villages; but she stood out. Amidst the varying shades of naturally brown and inevitably sun-baked skin of the Aymara Indian women seated nearby as well as of the stream of Aymaras and mestizos passing by, this cholita's near-ebony skin color presented an unexpected contrast.

During the first two months of my three-month stay in Bolivia I had not seen a single black person—my own pale brown countenance and loose curly brown hair in the mirror notwithstanding—until serendipity had me alight from the minibus I was riding at just the right place and just the right time so that I might spot that particular cholita seated beside her oranges. Many foreigners and even many Bolivians assume that the occasional black-skinned individual glimpsed on the streets of a Bolivian city is from some other country, not from the overwhelmingly Indian-mestizo nation that is Bolivia.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the assumption is correct. When I saw this cholita, however, I was fairly certain—precisely because she *was* a cholita—that the assumption did not apply to her. But that was all I was fairly certain of. A cascade of questions tumbled forth in my mind. How did this black-skinned woman become a part of the Bolivian population,

a population that distinguishes itself as the most indigenous in the Americas? Why was she wearing the clothing typically associated with indigenous women? Were there more black Bolivians and, if so, how many and where? Did they even identify as “black” or “Afro-Bolivian,” or did they identify as something else?<sup>3</sup>

Now, over a decade removed from that serendipitous sighting, I recall it as the moment my now long-standing interest in Bolivia’s population of African descent was born. And while I did not necessarily articulate it as such for sometime to follow, it was also the first step of an interwoven intellectual and personal journey that had me interrogating and navigating what I would come to view as the geographic, scholarly, sociopolitical, and cultural margins of the African diaspora in the Americas. It is a few of the strands of this interweaving that I narrate here, positioning myself as a professional participant observer of and personal key informant on researching while black at the Andean margins of Afro-Latin America.<sup>4</sup>

## An Intimation of African Diaspora Kinship in the Mountains of Bolivia

From Villa Fatima, the same neighborhood where the black cholita sold her oranges, a constant stream of minibuses, flotas, and camiones make their way into and out of the rural Yungas region, northeast of La Paz. Outside the city, a stretch of highway passes through the cold 13,000-foot reaches of the Cordillera Real, before descending and dwindling into the *camino de la muerte* (road of death). It is a fitting name for this narrow dirt road that winds down under rock overhangs, past the occasional modest waterfall or landslide, and precariously along far from modest 1,000-foot precipices that have swallowed up trucks and buses and all their human cargo for too many years. It was at the end of this road that the interweaving and marginality that have characterized my research journey first revealed themselves in their own serendipitous moment, four years after seeing the cholita negra, when I returned to Bolivia as a graduate student in cultural anthropology in search of a field site, a dissertation project, and “blackness” in Bolivia.

Several hours after departing La Paz, the minibus I rode safely deposited me in the picturesque hilltop town of Coroico, the capital of the rural Nor Yungas province. From there, I could look out at the surrounding mountains of the Yungas: lush, green, and adorned

with a patchwork of coca fields, small coffee plantations, and citrus groves. Out in those mountains—I had read in footnotes and been told tentatively in conversations—was where slaves labored during the colonial period after not being able to withstand the cold and thin air of the high-altitude silver mines of Potosi for which their labor had originally been enlisted. And out in those mountains, where the descendants of those slaves worked as forced laborers from the time of their emancipation in 1851 until the agrarian reform of 1953, was where I would find whatever remained of Bolivia’s small African-descended population. I found them, and a couple of them found me, at the end of yet another bumpy ride. This trip took only an hour or so and had me standing, squeezed in the back of a pickup truck with residents—as many as could possibly fit—of communities scattered alongside those mountains I had seen from Coroico.

Within moments of extracting myself from the crowded pickup, I found myself invited into the dim front room of an adobe brick house in the tiny community of Chijschipa, Nor Yungas. There, in what was the first home I entered in the first Yungas community I visited, I met two middle-aged women of African descent dressed in polleras and bowler hats. Almost as soon as names were exchanged, I was showered with a tide of questions from both women. “Where are you from? How is it that you speak Spanish so well, if you say you’re from the United States? And how can you be from the United States—you’re not as tall or as white or as loud as other gringos! Where are you *really* from? Tell us, how did you get hair like that? And skin that shade? What do your parents look like? Where do they come from?” My traveling companion, a Bolivian anthropologist who had resided in the area for years and knew these women, volunteered, by way of clearing up all the confusion, that I was a “gringa negra” (black gringo). That interjection did not entirely clear things up, but rather led to further queries.

“So there are blacks in the United States?” one of the women asked. “Yes,” I replied, “many more than here in Bolivia!” as if that was obvious and she should have known. With eyebrows raised, she replied, “I thought there were only blacks like us in Bolivia!” While this woman could have meant any number of things with “blacks like us”—poor, rural, or dark-skinned—that I did not have the opportunity to pursue at that moment, I nevertheless suspected that our exchange had significance far beyond the immediate conversation.

Earlier suggestions from non-black Bolivians that there was nothing to be learned among African-descended Bolivians, particularly from

the point of view of “race” or “blackness,” were belied by the immediate and unsolicited interest these women showed in placing me and alluding to their own blackness. What I had been told by non-black Bolivians and what I had gleaned from the infrequent and dismissive mentions of Bolivia’s African descendants in written sources was that blackness in this national context was only skin deep. Afro-Bolivians were described as having no collective or distinctive identity or a culture of their own. Instead, they were viewed as socially and culturally Aymara, having lived alongside the indigenous population since their ancestors arrived in Bolivia as slaves and having adopted many of the indigenous customs and beliefs. But these views were not entirely accurate, as my conversation in Chijschipa suggested, and as my subsequent research definitively determined.

No sooner had I entered “the field” than I became the field of inquiry for two local women. Before I, the curious and inquiring anthropologist far from home, could ask a single question these women made me *their* black subject—or perhaps, before all was clarified, their *potentially* black subject. The questions they directed at me were in response to what for them—and many others with whom I have crossed paths over a lifetime—was my ambiguous appearance. I interpreted the inspection of and commentary on my appearance and speech to be speculation on my ethnic, cultural, and national origins, but in particular on my *racial* origins and identity. I say interpreted because at no point did they utter the words ethnic, ethnicity, culture, nation, nationality, or race. If indeed a racial inquiry was being made, initiated by these local women, then it appeared that race in that context was in some ways located in physical markers and was of significance in social interactions. In other words, the search for blackness in Bolivia that had brought me to the Yungas was neither based on some figment of my personal imagination nor on the imposition of a foreign U.S. paradigm of difference and racialization in this non-U.S. context. While I had much more to learn, in this early moment of interaction, I felt I had a window through which to pursue the most basic questions of my research: Is blackness a socially and culturally salient category in the context of contemporary Bolivia? If so, how and where does that salience manifest itself? How is blackness lived, represented, experienced, and articulated by black and non-black Bolivians?

Inspired by the exchange with the two women in Chijschipa, I could not help but wonder just what boundaries of belonging and senses of affinity or kinship, if any, operate among and between

peoples of African descent scattered across the global diaspora? The women in Chijschipa and I inhabited very distant and different places in the African diaspora and we displayed some ignorance of each other's respective spaces in that diaspora. Yet, despite all that, from the very first moments of meeting each other, we tried to determine our relationship—were we “of the same people” in some sense. It was an intimation of African diaspora kinship in the mountains of Bolivia that would go on to inspire my ethnographic inquiries and strategies for years to come.

## What Are You?

The need to categorize people in some manner is a human universal, something present in all cultures. Race is just one among many ways that difference might be organized; and race is a social construction, not a biological reality. I was taught these truths in the very first anthropology course I took as an undergraduate but I experienced them long before that course, through my many personal encounters with the “What are you?” question. This is a question I have been asked on innumerable occasions, from childhood to the present, in locations near and far by individuals known and unknown trying to determine a label to attach to what in their eyes is my racially and/or ethnically ambiguous appearance and identity. Though the women in Chijschipa did not put it so bluntly, they were asking their own version of that question. And though I never asked so bluntly either, I recognize that I too was wondering precisely that—What are you?—when I saw the black cholita in Villa Fatima and tried to make sense of that seeming incongruity, that blackness “out of place.” My scholarly sensibilities and training soon had me pondering and subsequently investigating the more fitting and compelling question—How do you identify? The ways in which I pursued that question, in particular my deliberate emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork and what it allows for and achieves when carried out carefully, were influenced in part by my personal relationship to the “What are you?” question, including everything that question does *not* allow for and cannot achieve.

Many are offended when asked “What are you” and respond with “I’m human.” My own reaction has changed over time. As a child the question confused me. I could not understand why people could not tell what I was. As a young adult I resented the question, particularly when faced with it on a census or survey questionnaire that insisted that I reduce myself to a check mark in a box. As an anthropologist,

the question intrigues me. It belies claims that race does not matter, that we are living in an increasingly color-blind or postracial society. It reveals that despite the campaign against race as a biological reality reflected in phenotypes and genotypes, it is nevertheless perceived as something that can be “seen.” It suggests one’s identity is something that can be conveyed in a one-word, or at least quick, response allowing for tidy categorizing.

So, rather than being offended by this question, I have turned my encounters with the “What are you?” question into data-gathering and teaching moments, as when students ask it of me in my classes—a not infrequent occurrence. I respond with genuine interest, “What do you think I am?” Over the years, I have collected an ever-growing list of labels. While I do not identify with the vast majority of these labels, the exercise of collecting them highlights the fact that they are contingently produced by racially, ethnically, culturally, geographically, linguistically, nationally, and socioeconomically situated individuals attempting to sort out perceived identity markers. Those markers may range from the clothes I am wearing, the company I am keeping, the language I am speaking, the food I am eating, the style of my hair, the shade of my skin, or the country I am in at the moment the question is asked. The interpretations are further complicated for those who have bits of information like my first and last name or my research interests. Might they reveal my ancestry? Might I have some personal connection to the communities I study?

To ask what a person “is” engages an essentialist and otherwise problematic conception of race, ethnicity, and the nature of identity generally. Answering, as if a single word could sum up a person and what people they belong to, is equally problematic. Yet even without being asked directly, people implicitly and explicitly answer the question all of the time. We in the United States are, after all, a society that can apparently—if we are to take the lead of popular, political, and even scholarly discourse and practice—be neatly compartmentalized into whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. So, in recognition of the fact that no one can live entirely outside the reach of his or her society’s conception and organization of difference, and in recognition of the role the “What are you?” question plays in my personal experience in the field as well as in the underlying questions I pursue in my research and the methods I employ to pursue those questions, I will here answer the question: I am a transracially adopted female of mixed black and white parentage, born and raised

in the United States. I am not the Dutch or German that my last name might suggest. My fieldwork has nothing to do with being Bolivian or Afro-Bolivian myself; I am neither. A more meaningful answer can only come from a more meaningful question, however; that question is, “How do you identify?”

## I Didn't Know There Were Blacks in Bolivia

How a group or individual identifies cannot be interrogated, much less understood, if the existence of the group is not known or the diversity of individual experience is not acknowledged. This may seem obvious, but time and again some groups are overlooked. I have heard the remark, “I didn't know there were blacks in Bolivia,” countless times over the years from all kinds of people. Upon seeing an Afro-Bolivian for the first time, I too thought, “I didn't know there were blacks in Bolivia!” And when I turned to libraries in search of information, it was no wonder that I and others did not know. While books are, of course, but one means of obtaining information, it was telling that Bolivia's African descendants were little more than the occasional footnote in the occasional history book on slavery in Latin America. As my quest for information continued, it became clear that a very real void surrounded this population in popular and scholarly discourse, particularly on subject matter other than colonial era slavery.<sup>5</sup>

Multiple factors contribute to the silence surrounding blacks and blackness in Bolivia and many, I believe, might be explained in terms of margins.<sup>6</sup> Members of the African diaspora in the Americas occupy multiple margins within and beyond the states and societies in which they reside. While I do not want to insist on a scale of marginality, some members of the African diaspora do appear to be more marginal than others. There is a normative blackness that prevails in the global popular imagination, and there are “standard” reference points for blackness that operate in scholarship. These tend to depend on U.S.-centric notions of blackness and, secondarily, on Brazil. Sometimes the normative is conceded and other times not, but regardless, those who do not resemble it are pushed to the margins of scholarship, of political and social action, and of popular imaginings of African diaspora belonging. In other words, there are expectations of what blackness looks like, where it is located, and how it expresses itself historically, socially, and culturally and the margins are populated by

those falling outside those expectations, which are all too often based on homogenizing stereotypes.

The collective profile of Bolivia's population of African descent falls outside normative expectations of blacks and blackness on the level of the Americas. In an Atlantic world where a majority of the Africans transported to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade arrived in Brazil, the Caribbean, and the circum Caribbean for enslavement, those who arrived in what is now Bolivia occupied a geographic hinterland in the southern Andes mountain range on the distant Pacific west of South America. Their descendants now defy the conventional spatialization of the African diaspora and of blackness, and reinforce the ways in which space is racialized. For example, the fact that Afro-Bolivians are now concentrated in the rural and semitropical Yungas region is interpreted, within the context of Andean Bolivia, as befitting of their African origins; this, because the Yungas (literally meaning "warm valleys" in Aymara) are perceived to be the "closest thing to Africa in Bolivia."<sup>7</sup> The trans-Atlantic slave trade supported an economically and socially influential plantation system and consequent plantation legacy in various locations in the Americas; Bolivia, however, was not one of those locations. The earliest slaves to arrive in Bolivia were brought, at great expense, to this remote outpost to work in the silver mines and of Potosi, beginning around 1554. The Cerro Rico ("Rich Mountain") of Potosi was discovered a decade earlier and the indigenous labor that was originally enlisted to mine there was rapidly depleted. In later years, black slaves could also be found in the Yungas engaged in agricultural work but it was never on the scale seen elsewhere in the Americas. This was not a plantation society.

Published estimates of the size of the contemporary Afro-Bolivian population vary widely. They range from an unreasonable low of 2,000 to a high around 200,000, with several estimates in between.<sup>8</sup> What is relatively certain is that Afro-Bolivians make up no more than 1 to 2 percent of the national population, which positions them among the smallest populations of African descent in Latin America. The demographic reality they face is one in which indigenous peoples dominate the visual and cultural landscape of the nation. The Bolivian government officially recognizes some thirty-odd indigenous ethnic groups. In the 1990s, the government grudgingly included Afro-Bolivians as one of those groups even though they are not, in fact, "indigenous." This is just one of many examples of how African descendants, in order to be visible, recognized, and

part of the discourse on diversity and difference in Bolivia, are forced to present their identity and experience in terms of indigeneity. In the process, their attempts at articulating their African descent as distinct and salient are undermined. Unlike elsewhere in Latin America where blackness is constructed in relation to a mestizaje centered on the mixed figure of the mestizo, blackness in Bolivia is necessarily constructed in relation to a mestizaje centered on the figure of the Indian. Until the upsurge in rural to urban migration in the past twenty years, Afro-Bolivians traditionally shared not only the physical space of the Yungas region with Aymara Indians, but also a common history, socioeconomic reality, and cultural identity with their indigenous neighbors.

All of these are among the characteristics that contribute to the non-normative status of Bolivia's blacks within the African diaspora in the Americas. Bolivia's African descendants fall not only outside what the middle of the African diaspora in the Americas is perceived to be but also outside of the expectation of who and what is Bolivian. When the two women in Chijschipa assumed that I, as a person of color, could not be from the United States, they were actually directing at me the sort of assumption that is often directed at them as blacks in Bolivia—that they must be from *somewhere else*. I did not fit their image of someone from the United States—popularly imagined as white—and they did not fit the image of someone from Bolivia—popularly imagined as Indian or mestizo. My research in Bolivia suggests that an essential part of the social construction of blackness there revolves around explicit and implicit notions of “blackness (particularly) out of place” with Afro-Bolivian belonging contested on the national and regional levels.

## How to Know

While I may employ multiple strategies to investigate the meanings and experiences of blackness in Bolivia, I consider ethnographic fieldwork the heart and soul of my research. I do not carry out ethnographic fieldwork simply because that is what anthropologists do, though I do embrace it as part of my disciplinary identity. The choice of method and, perhaps more importantly, the philosophy propelling it, is also a deliberate intellectual and political response to the experiences and meanings of my own blackness. The ways in which my identity, and I dare say that of many other individuals, black and non-black, has been subjected to external interrogation and interpretation close to home

in less than satisfying ways drives the motivation for finding better ways “to know” what is going on with people and communities far from home.

In the field, those about whom and from whom I want to learn must be allowed every opportunity to express the complexities of their individual and collective identities. I do not want to be guilty of the common but flawed tendencies of forcing a normative blackness upon them, nor do I want to lose sight of the distinction between what someone “is” and how someone identifies. While I cannot eliminate the inherent inequality between ethnographer and local, or erase the reality of insider and outsider-ness, I *can* be a participant observer who is neighbor, friend, co-madre, inexpert helper in the coca field and kitchen, approved photographer, translator for tourists, etc., because I am *there*. And being there means that I am not limited to asking African descended Bolivians “How do you identify?”

With ethnographic fieldwork, I can afford African-descended Bolivians multiple and varied opportunities to explain to me how they identify and to *show* me how they identify through interviews, conversation over a shared meal, a brief exchange on a footpath on the way to the coca fields, at a syndicate meeting, a saya performance, a child’s birthday party, an elder’s funeral, and so many other occasions. Through such interactions, I can collect narratives and performances of blackness and not just answers to questions. All this I do as a self-consciously and self-reflexive black researcher whose identity does not go unobserved or uncommented upon by locals. I live with the rhetorical nods to black belonging expressed by those who know me—*hermana negra*, (*de la familia (negra)*, *gringa negra* (black sister, family, black gringo)—and those who do not know me—“*Quién es esa negrita?*” “*Aquella zamba quién es?*” “*De dónde es la mulata allí?*” (Who is that black? That zamba (Indian and black mixture), who is she? Where is that mulato from?). I also live my foreignness. I am Sarita, la gringuita, who might be able to lend a few bolivianos, dole out Tylenol for toothaches, and take and gift endless photos; Sarita who can be questioned continually about how much things cost in the United States and how long it takes to get there and how much people earn and what people eat and a slew of other information that together may constitute locals’ own sort of ethnographic effort from afar. Context is critical for any investigator’s understanding if that understanding is to be more than superficial.

## Another Hue of African Diaspora Belonging in Chile's Far-flung North

A handful of buses set out daily, before the crack of dawn, from downtown La Paz. From the thin-aired heights of the Andes the buses descend 13,000 vertical feet over eight hours to arrive at sea level in the port city of Arica, Chile. There, between the Atacama Desert and the Pacific Ocean, and not far from the borders of Peru and Bolivia, Arica's inhabitants reside on multiple frontiers. Among those inhabitants are a majority of Chile's extremely few African descendants, estimated to be less than one percent of the national population. This, and the neighboring Valle de Azapa, is where I traveled during summer 2010 to pilot a new project and establish a new field site.

My entrance into this "new field" came in the form of a birthday party. Hours after arriving, I was invited to the home of an elderly woman of African descent who was turning ninety. As I sat in her living room, surrounded by what I had been told were family members and participants in various Afro-descent organizations of the area, I could not help but think "*Really?*" The woman at the center of the festivities was clearly of African descent, but looking around I felt that most of those present looked, quite frankly, *white*. The irony of my reaction did not escape me. After years of personally navigating and intellectually interrogating the boundaries of blackness and belonging in the African diaspora, of championing a more diverse and inclusive understanding of blackness, and of having my *own* blackness doubted and questioned by others, I was guilty of looking at these African descendants through a lens of normativity that cast them as something "other than black."

It was not a studied reaction; it was a personal knee-jerk reaction. It was, nevertheless, a fitting entry into my investigation of blackness in Chile. This new research focuses on Chile's grassroots Afro-descendant organizations, the first of which appeared in 2001. The research examines the motivations and strategies of these organizations as well as the internal and external challenges they face. Afro-descendants across the Americas protest their invisibility, evidenced in their absence from political, scholarly, and popular discourse, their erasure from history, and their socioeconomic and sometimes spatial marginality within their nations and the region more broadly. While this type of invisibility operates in Chile as well, Afro-Chilean invisibility is quite often also literal, with African descent being indiscernible to the naked eye, so to speak.

This form of invisibility is compelling, particularly when considered alongside the frontier dynamics of the Arica and Valle de Azapa area. In 1925, the region, which previously belonged to Peru, became part of Chile and was subjected to a process of *chilenización* that sought to drive out unwanted ethnic elements. Afro-descendants have that chilenization inscribed on their bodies and in their “Chilean” cultural identity. All this explains why one might hear it asserted, by those familiar with the African descent population in Chile, that, “There are no *blacks* in Chile, maybe *Afro-descendants*, but no *blacks*.” I could not help but notice that African descendants in and around Arica were consistent and deliberate in referring to themselves as *afrodescendientes*; the term *negro* was never used. *Afrochileno* was a term I seldom heard, except from my own mouth. This seems to reflect an awareness of the arbitrariness of their Chilean citizenship. With the shift in the national border still in living memory and the loss and division of land and family still affecting the experience of this population, it is apparent to many that they might just as easily have ended up as Peruvians, or even Bolivians, as Chileans. It will be interesting to explore the ways in which this newfound self and collective identification as *Afro-descendant*, along with the social, cultural, and political organizing through which it is publically exercised, expresses a sense of belonging in a broader border-transcending global African diaspora while hinting at a contested or ambivalent national citizenship. Alternatively, the motivations and strategies employed by organizations may solidify a decidedly local sense of blackness and descent only minimally informed by what is going on elsewhere (e.g., the normative “middle”) in activist Afro-Latin America.

My initial reaction to the first Afro-Chileans I met was not unlike the reactions several Afro-Chileans subsequently had toward me. Whereas Afro-Bolivians had explicitly and implicitly expressed to me a sentiment of “You’re black/Afro-descendant, aren’t you,” Afro-Chileans expressed a sentiment more along the lines of “You’re not Afro-descendant, are you?” Their doubt was disconcerting, but it also reinforced the fact that blackness in Chile is seldom physical and, if and when it is, the traits that hint at it are not necessarily familiar or recognized. My research in Chile is just beginning but these observations in this particular margin of the African diaspora in Latin America already reinforce my intellectual insistence on a more diverse conceptualization and theorization of blackness that *actively* dismantles the prevailing alternative—a monolithic, homogenized, and stereotyped blackness.

## Braiding and Unbraiding Belonging

An Afro-Bolivian woman slid the bandana off my head. I had strategically placed it to hide at least some of the frazzled strands escaping from the two braids into which I had parted my curls. At the time, almost all the women in the Yungas community where I was carrying out fieldwork parted their hair into two braids like that, minus the bandana.<sup>9</sup> The woman informed me that my braids were not quite right and she would fix them. She unwound the three strands making up each braid and then nimbly interwove them anew into two tighter and neater braids, ending not in the poufy loose ends I had left escaping from wrapped rubber bands, but in precise points needing no rubber bands. She had transformed my hair, making it more like hers and, in the process, more “local.” It is this hairstyle that marks a woman as being a *cholita* (as opposed to a *mestiza*, *blanca*, foreigner, etc.), and in turn a symbol of the Andean region. It is this hairstyle that indigenous and black women share in common, both having had it imposed upon their ancestors by the Spaniards during the colonial period.

For me, the hairstyle was a choice. On one level, it seemed practical in an environment where dirt and heat were part of the terrain and showers hard to come by, making hair grooming a chore. On another level, it was a choice that, combined with my skin color, made me appear partially “local” (“partially” because I never donned the *pollera* skirt and bowler hat that would have completed the look). Perhaps it was a gesture no different from eating *puti* in place of bread, pausing to *challar la pachamama*, entering into *compradrazgo* relationships, or just being present for all the mundane and the exceptional of everyday community life that one expects of the ethnographer engaged in participant observation.<sup>10</sup> It was a way of negotiating, albeit superficially, my belonging.

However, when I reflect on that braiding and rebraiding in relation to aspects of my hair experience in the United States, another layer of significance surfaces. I can recall instances when my hair was touched by relative strangers in the United States who pulled lightly on a curl and then marveled at how it stretched down and then bounced right back up when released from their fingers. “How did you get hair like that?” “Is it natural?” Might those questions be veiled attempts at determining my ancestry, an indirect way of asking, “What are you”? Those were moments not of belonging but of distancing, where my hair marked me as different from the person curiously touching it.

In the field, I needed no reminders of my difference from those with whom I lived; I never stopped being me and thus being “from somewhere else.” So braiding my hair was but a small attempt to bridge a gap, to feel a bit closer, even if that closeness was not the same as that inspired by shared membership in the African diaspora. I recognize that symbols and other manifestations of affinity, kinship, solidarity, and belonging—whether profound, superficial, discursive, performed, imagined, or otherwise—are points of interrogation in my research as well as points of lived experience for me as researcher. This, I believe, can only enhance understanding of the African diaspora as concept and lived experience.

Ultimately, my braids were temporary, abandoned each time I returned to the United States. After all, in the United States braids like that are reserved for little girls, not grown women, and not professors. Why risk suspicions that I had “gone native,” crossing some line between insider and outsider that might signal a loss of supposed objectivity. Anthropologists of color are already conspicuous without sporting “gone native” hair; and so I unbraided my hair and it stays unbraided as I navigate a different sphere of belonging—that of an anthropologist returning from the field and a scholar in the academy. Nevertheless, I remain keenly aware that my person and identity are intertwined with my intellectual pursuits whether I am out in the field or back on campus. We all have multiple identities and straddle multiple communities. Some in the academy may choose to suppress that fact in the name of objectivity; others may have the luxury of doing so because they inhabit normative and supposedly unmarked bodies. The fact remains, nonetheless, that the interweaving of the personal and the intellectual is intriguingly inevitable.

## Notes

1. The term *cholita* refers to a woman of Indian or mixed Indian and European descent who is generally urban, associated with the marketplace, a speaker of Aymara or Quechua in addition to Spanish, and identifiable by her distinct attire. This attire (originating in colonial Spanish peasant dress) includes a multilayered skirt called a *pollera* and a bowler hat perched over hair that is always braided in two long braids. The *cholita* is often perceived as an intermediate/“in process” identity between Indian and *mestizo*. The *cholita* has come to be a symbol of Bolivia’s Indian-ness and Andean-ness. For discussion of the category and image of the Andean *cholita*, see Mary Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos: Stories of Race and Sex in the Andes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

2. Bolivian national identity is founded on the idea that Bolivians are Indian in blood and cultural heritage. Herbert Klein calls Bolivia, “the most Indian of the American republics,” noting that as recently as the 1976 census only a minority of the national population was monolingual in Spanish with the majority speaking Aymara, Quechua, or some other indigenous language. Herbert Klein, *Bolivia: The Evolution of a Multi-Ethnic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). According to the 2001 national population census, almost 80 percent of Bolivians self-identify as belonging to an indigenous group.
3. In this essay, I use the terms black, Afro-Bolivian, and African descendant interchangeably. In the context of Bolivia, the term *afroboliviano* came into currency in the early 1990s with the formation of an urban-based Afro-Bolivian identity movement. Prior to that time, the words *negro*, *negrito*, and *moreno* were used with *moreno* (brunette or brown-skinned person) being considered the politest, as it is elsewhere in Latin America.
4. I position myself in this way in relation to this text because I am aware that I am part of a larger disciplinary culture and scholarly dialogue but, rather than cite the literature, I want to use this space to cite my personal experience and perspective. In this way, I hope to express an individual narrative somewhat akin to what those I interview in the field express to me. However, I do want to acknowledge voices from the dialogue around reflexivity, positionality and subjectivity, insider/outsider-ness in the field, the production of knowledge, and the like. Among those voices are: Ruth Behar; A. Lynn Bolles; Faye Harrison; Janis Faye Hutchinson; June Jordan; Lila Abu-Lughod; Zora Neale Hurston; Deborah Reed-Danahay; Barbara Tedlock; France Winddance Twine; and so many others.
5. Afro-Bolivians have gained considerable visibility in recent years, though primarily in popular media as opposed to scholarly sources. This increased visibility is largely due to the emergence of an Afro-Bolivian identity movement in the early 1990s. That movement used the traditional Afro-Bolivian music and dance tradition *saya* to unite blacks and draw attention to the black presence in the nation. As a result, *saya* began to dominate images associated with blackness in Bolivia and what attention Afro-Bolivians received was invariably tied to the performance of *saya* as opposed to other aspects of identity and experience. See Sara Busdiecker, “The Emergence and Evolving Character of Afro-Bolivian Mobilization—From the Performative to the Political,” in *New Social Movements in the African Diaspora: Challenging Global Apartheid*, ed. Leith Mullings (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
6. See Sara Busdiecker, “We are Bolivians Too: The Meaning and Experience of Blackness in Bolivia” PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2006.
7. I explore the relationship between blackness and space/place in Sara Busdiecker, “Where Blackness Resides: Afro-Bolivians and the Spatializing and Racializing of the African Diaspora,” *Radical History Review* 103 (Winter 2009): 105–116.
8. Bolivia’s African descendants have not been counted as African descendants or blacks on a national population census since 1900. According to officials

at the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, which administers the census, African descendants will be counted as such on the next census, to be carried out in either 2011 or 2012.

9. On a trip to Bolivia in fall 2009, I carried in my suitcase a few pounds of multicolored slender synthetic braids. They had been purchased by two young Afro-Bolivian women living temporarily in the United States. I was charged with the task of delivering them to two family members of the women back in Bolivia. While quality braids are not necessarily easy to come by in Bolivia (thus the purchase in the United States), they have become very popular among Afro-Bolivian women in recent years. In fact, among women in their twenties and thirties, long slender braids weaved into the hair have entirely replaced the traditional two-braid hairstyle. By abandoning that traditional style, these young women clearly distance themselves from the cholita category and its association with Indian-ness. These new braids are clearly marked as belonging to blacks. By using them, Afro-Bolivian women perform their participation in a global black hair aesthetic shared across the diaspora.
10. *Puti* is boiled unripe banana. *Challar la pachamama* refers to the custom of toasting or offering symbolic payment (challar) to mother earth (la pachamama). A common and simple example is pausing to pour out onto the ground a few drops of one's beer before taking the first sip. *Compadrazgo* refers to relationships established through god-parenthood.

## Posing as Subject: Exchange and the Art of Access in Trinidad

Harvey Neptune

*Their naked savage was quickly getting on to civilized things.*

Claude McKay, Banjo

When he says it, I am in faded blue jeans and a white v-neck T-shirt and only just seated in a sturdy wooden chair. It is said casually, but in an exotic, endangered baritone. It is the kind of voice carried around here in Trinidad like a prize from the old days of proud English rule. *You hear voice. Now, that is voice*—this is the kind of approving phrase my mother would offer were she here in his studio garage. To me, though, right next to him, the old man might as well have a foreign tongue. His impeccable colonial way of pronouncing everything is actually a distraction. My ears have been raised too late for his form. Raised after national independence, I am used to the loose lyricism that swallowed up nearly all the “good English” on the little island. This history between us might explain why his words, for a brief moment, make no practical sense to me; no more than the smell of stale oil paint or the sight of canvasses crowding the room. Then, suddenly, the idle schoolboy is alarmed by a bell, the old man’s stray syllables assume a form of order. They assemble and file and take on a certain order. The result is an awful sentence. “Go ahead,” is what he says, “take *all* your clothes off.”

The sac of air is driven from my stomach and replaced by a weakening thrill. This practical stranger, a man who must be nearing eighty, wants me to strip naked before him. I have been twiddling a pen between my right thumb and index finger; it might have fallen, or maybe not.

Ever since showing me to a seat, the old man has been ambling about the room. Now that he pauses to scout for something above and behind my head, I get a chance to study him. On an island where complexion has flavored people's taste in other people since the start of known history, he is bland brown. This plainness, though, has its privilege; it is a shade that assures his presence almost never offends, whatever the local setting. He has healthy skin, the old man, well lined with years but nowhere weighed down by it. There is a funny fix to his mouth; it looks too packed with teeth to remain pursed, giving him the appearance of somebody set to bite or to grin. The rest of his face climbs into an eggish head sparsely planted with wispy gray hair. The old man's body, tall and still mostly slender, stands oblivious to all the aging going on above. Limbs that look way too taut for their tenure extend from the white T-shirt and three-quarter khakis he wears. They are muscular reminders of a past deep in dance. He turns away, slowly but so easily that it seems rehearsed, and it sinks in just how kindly time has done by him.

None of this nakedness was in the mind of the character gripped in the chair on his way to the garage. Bookish ambition is what had brought him, on a typical sticky dry-season afternoon, to take a bus, a taxi, and a walk to get to this reserved residential side of Port of Spain. A graduate student living in New York City for a decade, the young man had returned "home" to research a dissertation on nationalism and imperialism in World War II Trinidad. Early in the process, however, the inadequacy of the routine of hunting and then reading books, newspapers, and other similar sources began to nag. Accessing certain kinds of evidence, he quickly concluded, would require calling upon the freshly spoken rather than the preserved written word.

Especially intriguing to him was the possibility of talking with one particular individual, a man with a renaissance range of creativity and rare artistic stamina. This man, practicing his crafts since the mid-1930s, was an artist, dancer, and musician long recognized by local elites and honored by the independent state. He was—to use a cliché—a national "icon." Most important, for the purposes of the

researcher, however, the old man had all the makings of a special human store—or better, a boutique—of undocumented twentieth-century colonial Trinidad history. To sit down and hear him recall the past would be a dream. So even though the student had been cautioned about the old man’s reputation for a cranky, cringe-causing, cantankerous side, it gave him no pause. What was a little foulness if it came in the name of groundbreaking scholarship? A few short formal phone calls later, he had fixed a date with his dream.

But while scholars plot, the god of fieldwork—Hermes, perhaps—smiles. Historical research that turns to the living as a primary source courts frustration, or worse, mockery, of its imperious enterprise. When called on to perform as documents, people assume the potential to wield authority over the narratives produced about the past. In this sense, sources that breathe exercise genuine power in the production of history—even more so than their inanimate counterparts.<sup>1</sup> An archive with the gift of voice, in short, is a formidably entitled being. Interviewees carry the capacity to make claims and demands on academic crafters of history. And once they recognize their value as “outsourced” intellectual laborers, local “informants”—to use a telling former term of reference—they may upend the traditional lop-sidedness of the encounter between researcher and document, these “outsourced” humans may request or, more often, insinuate forms of reciprocity. Food, clothes, a lift, or the use of a laptop represent just some of the more routine prestations and obligations extracted from researchers by these “native guides”—to use another revealing label. These rituals of exchange, so common in the field, reward analysis. Beyond humbling the conceit of a disinterested academic ethnography, these bartered moments offer scholars an opportunity to draw from their own experiences, lessons about power and the making of history.

The instructive value can be especially rich when reciprocity in the field costs academics not material commodities, labor, or capital but dearly guarded biographical commitments. On the occasions that researchers, for the sake of access to sources, take themselves to the cliff of comfortable selfhood, they dramatize the knotty ties among authority, knowledge, desire, and belonging. In these risky instances professional self-scrutiny need not fall into the trap of solipsism. Such exercises in introspection, to the contrary, can aid in the cultivating of a critical and compassionate scholarship, one that honors the “human” in the academic ideal known as the humanities.

This chapter takes up the case of the green graduate student seated in the Port of Spain garage. At once unnerving and enlightening, it is a story of research reciprocity soaked in irony. The young man stepped into the meeting expecting to learn about the particularly Trinidadian “character” invented by anticolonial nationalists in order to challenge the ruling British identity. Forty-five minutes later, he paced away terribly more informed about conflicts within his own character and identity. Concerns that the novice scholar had come to capture through the lens of “history,” it turns out, lived on and, in fact, lived through his own self in the present.

## Background to the Portrait

The dissertation that had brought the graduate student back to the place where he had spent more than half his life integrated thematic interests in both Trinidadian nationhood and U.S. imperialism. Its central subject was the wartime establishment of U.S. military bases in what was then a British territory brewing patriotic activism. How, the study proposed to investigate, did locals perceive and receive the Yankee presence in this nationalist context, the Age of Caliban? Driven by the quiet, unreasonable ambition of an unpublished graduate student, the dissertation aimed at exploring all elements of Trinidadian society. It would eventuate, the student quietly expected, as an achievement of total history, not mere “cultural history” as many tended to hear in the proposed project.<sup>2</sup>

Yet conceits aside, “culture” was indeed central to the dissertation. A major premise was that by the time the U.S. military began to construct bases in late 1940, things cultural had assumed a decisively political significance in the colony. In the patriotic campaign to retrench British rule and to rationalize Trinidadian nationhood, the student recognized, they idealized certain popular performances and creative products—calypso, most famously—as “national culture.” Certainly, he reasoned, the intrusion of U.S. personnel paychecks and practices must have redefined—for better or worse—this process of nationalist culture construction. In their various guises as patrons of calypso, models of masculinity, favored employers, “Yankee Invaders” had to have intensified struggles over the status of culture in Trinidad as well as “Trinidadian” in culture. How these antagonisms expressed themselves and how they excited and upset the entire social spectrum constituted the researcher’s main object of study. From this material, he aimed to plot a complicated story that moved around the axes of entangled empires and constructed nationhood.

This purpose explains the relentless perspiration on the student's dark brown forehead as he neared the address scribbled on a Post-it note that day. The man he was about to meet had acquaintances among the coterie of patriots, people at the core of the scholarly project. Learning from this man promised a crisper, more intimate sense of the cultural politics of the men and a few women at the forefront of framing how mid-twentieth-century Trinidadians understood their national selves on the eve of the U.S. occupation. Endless sweat was an honest sign of nervous excitement. The prospect made him uneasy, like he was on the verge of something barely legal. Steady wiping of his hairline proved useless. The more he mopped, the more the beads beached up and trickled. The strong afternoon sun only made sweaty matters worse.

The researcher had specific expectations from the occasion. Key among them was the hope that it would disclose how the local coterie of anticolonial nationalists thought about alternate modes of group loyalty like gender, sexuality, class and, in particular, race. Reading up on the period, he had become convinced that these mostly white and near-white artists and intellectuals imagined themselves as anti-racists. In their minds, promoting an aesthetic sensibility peculiar to Africans and New World descendants of Africans amounted to effective subversion. This intelligentsia saw itself, in short, as a cohort of real race rebels.

The student was not so sure. When it came to patriots' public embrace of black aesthetics, he could not confidently distinguish dissidence from complicity. To him, the difference between their protests against racist "Western civilization" and what was viewed as their unwitting weakness for the era's primitivist vogue was not clear. He thus saw this interview as a precious chance to clarify a crucial ambiguity, to better discern the "identity politics" of Trinidad's founding nationalist generation.

There was more to the giddy pull of this interview. The subject had first-hand experience with the U.S.-sponsored cultural ferment of occupied Trinidad. Back then, as American wartime officials hunted down and rewarded wholesome local diversions for restless and often vicious military servicemen, his range of talents found him in heavy demand. The local spotlight had already shone on his accomplishments as a dexterous, dramatic young dancer and "swinging" boogie-woogie pianist. Once the Yankees got word, the old man—then just a teenager—wound up as a regular act on the U.S. military base entertainment circuit. This Trinidadian personality, the researcher

appreciated, was a singularly valuable source. How many living persons could so credibly and deeply illuminate the local cultural scene during the occupation? Who, in particular, could inform on the contemporary significance of self-interested Yankee patronage?

A rare titillation, finally, tinged this encounter. The old man, the returning student had been half told half warned, “likes boys.” To his trained academic ears, this simply meant that the interviewee, a father and a husband for over three decades, was probably queer. It was a happily provocative piece of hearsay, so much so that it sent the researcher conjuring up wishful anticipations of the interview. In his perfectly fantastic scenario—call it scholotopia—the exchange would conclude with him well schooled in the sexual politics of what back then was tightly closeted “perversion.” The old man would set straight Trinidadians apprehensions of subversive intimacy. He would even go as far as to scandalize the official silence surrounding sexual transactions between Yankee and local men in occupied Trinidad. The conversation would shine a bright, amoral—even mischievous at times—light on truths conventionally reserved for the dark vicious corner of Trinidadian history. Ultimately, dreamt the wishful young scholar, the meeting would equip him to loosen the heterosexist stronghold on nationalist historiography. It would leave him, more broadly, prepared to help queer the Caribbean past.

These, then, were his designs. What, in fact, happened was quite another story, best told by the researcher himself.

## Self-Portrait of the Researcher as a Black Male

I arrive at the appointed address. For the umpteenth time, I mop my forehead. The house is squat and narrow; a structure mostly made of brick and painted in a bureaucratic gray and white. Ornate in appearance, it is fronted by a small porch with fancy wooden latticework that reminds me of eyelashes. No doubt this home once made a stylistic statement of arrival. Today, though, it has the secure charming feel of a proverb, anachronism being an essential part of its appeal. I wonder briefly about the age of the structure. Drawing a blank, I think to myself that a real historian would know the answer.

I ring the bell and wait, taking the time to notice the neatness of the neighborhood. It is not a familiar Trinidad. The way things are laid out is too concrete and deliberate. In the part of the island that I know best, the landscape has always sprouted some grassy defiance to orderly schemes of settlement.

The old man soon appears, and, after a distantly curt greeting, unlatches the gate and shows me to the back. I walk ahead; again, I use the cushion of flesh between my thumb and index to sap sweat from my forehead. The building extends farther back than expected. Detached and off to the side stands a garage that could hold two cars. He motions me in. Despite the size, the room is crammed. Scores of drawings and paintings, many of them portraits, rest, lean, and tilt everywhere: under tables, against corners, behind the doors, off the walls, everywhere. Wherever I look, fine and often recognizable faces of varying shades of brown stare back. It is as if I have strayed onto a stage before a packed distinguished audience. I wonder about my own appearance. The old man invites me to have a seat.

An awkward combination of nerves and awe keeps me quiet. The city, too, it suddenly strikes me, has gone silent. Car horns, vanity mufflers, dancehall music, pedestrian vocalists, vagabond dogs: the whole urban cacophony muted. I search the room in vain for something to absorb me, something to soak up my anxiousness. Then, from behind my back, comes the sandy sound of stuff being dragged around. I want badly to turn around but lack the boldness. Finally, he speaks, rescuing me from my self-absorption.

“Have you ever had a portrait done?” he asks.

“No,” I reply neutrally, pivoting around to him, careful to avoid his eyes.

“Oh, you absolutely should,” he says. I crease a smile.

“You definitely should have one.”

“Ok,” I say, agreeing for the sake of being agreeable and because I am anxious to get on with the interview.

“There will be no distractions,” he assures me. The plan is for him to field my questions while painting. No problem; I reach down into my laptop bag for a notebook and settle back into the chair. A feeling close to comfort approaches, slowly and from far off. It never arrives, since it is now that he voices the urging words that will suck the sac of air from my stomach. “Go ahead, take *all* of your clothes off.”

I have no sense of the quantity of time that passes before I respond. To him, or anyone else, I might appear to be at the mercy of reflex. Here in my own pants, though, I feel nothing if not mindful. Once his meaning settles, my own head begins to eddy with doubts, counters, and further considered doubts. The coolness of the garage is no match for the heat of the battle in my head.

He is simply seeking a fair exchange; isn't he? After all, even though researchers tend to be stingy and private with their “off the books”

fieldwork stories, these acts of reciprocation are commonplace enough to be considered an ethnographical ritual. One of the rare public admissions comes from anthropologist Sidney Mintz. In the preface to his underserved biographical classic, *Worker in the Cane*, Mintz explains that while he “never paid [his subject] directly for his cooperation,” he acknowledges bringing gifts and contributing to house repairs and children’s dental care. A “powerful reciprocity,” according to Mintz, existed between himself and his “informant.”<sup>3</sup> If this reads like a revelation, it is not because Mintz is some maverick ethnographer. It simply reconfirms, if anything, Mintz’s knack for matter-of-factly recognizing realities that appear suspiciously singular until the academy catches up to him. Truth is, almost all researchers familiar with the field will readily agree that “giving back” is virtually a given.

But, still, this is a special case, isn’t it? Parting with money or a present is one thing; surrendering the privacy of the body quite another. Ever since the story of Eve, Western eyes have come to regard nakedness as symbolic of moral lapse. To go without clothes before unfamiliar eyes has come to define the obscene. This shamefaced apprehension of the bare body, to be sure, has long been subject to principled dissent. Many in the very world of art, in fact, have viewed themselves as the avant garde in the struggle to redeem the imagery of unclothed persons. They imagine their mission as etching out the ethical doubt cast over images of the unfettered flesh. Rendering them as expressions of the aesthetic spirit, legions of modern artists have long regarded the bared body as not naked but as a nude.<sup>4</sup> It is to be looked at, not leered at.

Seen from this perspective, I should be flattered by the artist’s offer. Beyond the easy vanity of being elected a “model,” I should accept the more profound honor of being recruited to help serve a heroic modern cause: to emancipate society from its unreasoned restrictions. My recruiter, moreover, has been an outstanding veteran in that struggle, practicing portraiture for as long as my own mother has been alive. Almost anyone who cares anything about art in Trinidad would be happy to take my seat and have their likeness inscribed with this old man’s signature. Instead of all this deliberating, they would be undressing. For many people, that is, my absorbing dilemma would be a welcome privilege, pure and simple. What is so special about me, I ask myself, as the beautiful face of a former Miss Universe portrait beams down at me?

I do not as a habit move through the world feeling particularly special, but I do consider myself a man, though not so much a man’s

man as a boy's man—always game for the playful rather than spoiling for a fight. I note, accordingly, that the only nudes on display in this garage are female; and, even if a few men, I guess, must have modeled for this artist, who knows about them? What kind of a man would license his body to be possessed by another? Convention has dictated that in portraits of unclothed people the male performs the rendition while a still female avails herself. In our patriarchal society, in other words, the nude is not neuter. Over time, it became a feminized concept. Portrayals of the naked male might have once promised in good faith to radiate heroic meaning—confidence, authority, and tranquility. This is no longer true. Men who bare themselves for the sake of art risk a step down from the lofty fortress of manliness.<sup>5</sup>

For me, moreover, this descent has the potential to overturn into a kind of vertigo. By personal and educational background, I have been trained to pay serious mind to performance of gender. I spent the first half of my life in a small village in south Trinidad where, as in much of the island, masculine anxieties were forever on show and under study. Everyone—men and women—incessantly scrutinized how men conducted themselves. Only a few were man enough or crazy enough to admit so. People mostly stayed mum, when they did choose to acknowledge their thinking on how men played themselves, ironic jokiness was the preferred form of expression.<sup>6</sup>

Then, just as I entered the legitimate age of manhood and moved to New York City, I wound up in a graduate school in the heart of Greenwich Village. Here, too, consciousness of masculine conduct was inescapable. The big difference, however, was that discussions about it was legitimate and serious. It were a matter to ponder not just out loud on the street but also in depth in my graduate seminar.

By the mid-1990s, in fact, masculinities had become an essential subject of exhilarating scholarly examination. Part of an impassioned and at times belligerent brand of discourse on identity and representation, the issue of manhood sparked exciting, brilliant, and sometimes sniping exchanges. This was especially true within the colored section where my cohort consumed the writing on matters like Robert Mapplethorpe's images of black males as if it were breaking news. We read, we interrogated, and, of course, we discussed them.<sup>7</sup>

By the time I arrive at the garage, in other words, I am practiced in cultivating sensitivity to the artistic uses of bodies like my own. It has become nearly impossible to process the old man's request to pose nude without referring to the secular trinity of race, gender

and sexuality. I cannot imagine public consumption of my own naked body without wondering about a searchingly sensual male viewership. That the artist intent on capturing my body is a man only aggravates the anxiety. His non-whiteness, for sure, spares me the worry of having to figure as a white person's fetish. Still, left standing before me is the difficulty of having to give in to the gaze of another male. To me, in other words, this is an occasion of gender troubles. Can I model naked for him without queer feelings?

This is the decisive question, the one that gets to the gut of my dilemma. Whether or not I agree to bare myself for the old man all comes down to the kind of manhood I can comfortably embody. To refuse to lose my clothes is to affirm a conservative—if not coward—version of black manliness. It is to present a straight and narrow statement of what it takes for black men to live comfortably in their skin. Even worse, maybe, to stay clothed would be a shameless exercise practicing in rank hypocrisy. Here I am, after all, perpetrating research that challenges the normalizing tyranny of heterosexuality; yet, once asked to go beyond the normal expectations of heterosexual manliness, I balk. The old man does not know it, but his request poses a test to my integrity. How could I not pass?

The test is anything but easy. I begin with my T-shirt, scrolling it up my torso then dragging it up off my head. The action comes off with a surprising smoothness, especially given the knot of fright stuck in my stomach. Then, rather than fling the shirt (as I would normally do), I fold it, practicing a care I learned from college days when I worked in a gift shop. I buy more time, laying the shirt on my bag with redundant caution. I steal a look at the old man. He stands motionless, brush in hand, easel at his side, and a calm expression on his face. I allow my eyes to roam the ceiling and feel around my waist. I inhale, and then give the belt buckle a few tugs. It loosens; I exhale. Time to undo the top button; after a little fidgeting (still refusing to let my eyes down), I unzip myself. Finally, in a grand gesture of pure bravado, I reach to my hips and, in gunslinger fashion, grip both jeans and underwear at their rims; then, with legs extended like a slalom racer, I drag these last layers of privacy down to my ankles until they would go no further. Sitting up, I pedal free of both. And with the same needless delicacy applied on the shirt, I set them down to make a small pile.

I am ready for the interview; except that the pen is not in my hands. He points under the bag. I retrieve the pen, then open the notebook and balance it on my right thigh. I consider my notes, though not without stealing a sharp glance at myself.

For the first few moments, questions are tumbling out with neither formulation nor reflection. It is as if they ask themselves. He replies, talking as he does his brushwork, and I transcribe. Every now and then I look up from my writing. Each time, I find him touring my body. These looks leave me with a feverish cold followed up by the warm sensation of slow-pulsing arousal. Yet whenever I check, nothing is changed. This is all in my head. I begin to convince myself that there is no need for concern. Truth is, all this time, I am in a state of quiet inner panic. Any sign of physical arousal would freak me out, would have me likely scurrying out the room scared as a little puppy. My straightness is at stake. With the seer being male, I must resist the erotic thrill of being seen as desirable.

The more he stares, the harder it gets to maintain poise. The questions keep churning out, as indifferently as his answers. The old man, in truth, responds with aplomb that, to be honest, I envy. Not once does he interrupt his routine of gazing and painting. His answers might or might not be genuinely thoughtful. Consumed with maintaining a certain mastery of my situation, I cannot afford the presence of mind to tell.

It is only after about ten minutes that I finally feel capable of conducting an interview (rather than just sitting in on one). Inhabiting this man's gaze has grown on me. His objectification, mind you, does not necessarily feel any less alienating. It is simply that I have come to trust myself to fend it off. I gain confidence in my ability to fortify myself against the threat of seduction that accompanies being appraised as a body worthy of art. Cruising desiring eyes by themselves cannot draw my trigger; the beholder counts. Gender, to put it another way, matters. The lesson is reassuring. I am able to sit myself squarely in a queer situation and yet not behave queerly. A defining aspect of me remains intact. A sense of safety returns to my skin. From this moment on, the interview proceeds as planned, just as if we are both completely clothed. I do learn something of interwar Trinidadian nationalism and of life in occupied Trinidad. Little of this interview though made its way into the dissertation or the book.

## Coda

For years, the researcher carried this story with quiet, bemused pride. Though he understood that the experience exposed the imaginary bars planted around his own notion of masculinity, it still felt good to him. The episode belonged within a larger story of progress: to pose

for a nude portrait was to contribute to a reframing of the masculine ideal. Baring his flesh before the appreciative eyes of another male advanced the cause of molding a more open, vulnerable, and courageous manhood. He had moved toward abandoning the sexist vision that rendered males who gave in to other men's sensuous pleasures as dubious if not flat out disgusting. Real men, he showed, did not have to feel trapped into cocksure models when it came to erotic desire. What he had achieved was a form of liberation.

This transgressive take on that day's lesson was reaffirmed in the faces of close, longtime male friends who heard about the episode. First came their fret, followed by humorous disdain. For him, these reactions were conclusive and a good bit gratifying. In so far as most of his "boys" suspected him of committing something doubtful or even nasty he was pleased to virtually plead guilty. In his mind he had managed to stand up (well, literally, sit down) for a new enlightened expression of masculinity. Male, black and West Indian, he nevertheless voted for a reformed image of men in relationship to other men and male bodies. Given a queer test, he had taken it and passed.

Lately, though, his thinking has been shifting. The scholar recently started wondering if this was a test he should have passed up—rather than passed. The uncertainty began bubbling after his account came in for queasy responses from unexpected sources. These listeners, generally far more freethinking about gender matters than many of his closest male friends, gave the impression that his tale had been overlooking something, something shady yet weighty. Female, black, and often of the academy, this dubious audience could not be honestly dismissed as traditional "conservatives." But even as the researcher sensed the legitimacy of their suspicion, it took him some time to fully absorb their skepticism. When the understanding came, when he finally figured that their doubt had something to do with an experienced distrust for the liberating promise of the body, the researcher felt compelled to redress the ending of his story. Second guessing himself, he started wondering about his eagerness to embrace this queer situation. What if it actually helped to breathe life into a racial drama, one he had hastily consigned to "history"? The old man, after all, belonged to the same coterie of nationalist artists and intellectuals that he suspected of practicing primitivism, even if inadvertently. There was no good reason for the researcher to assume that the old man's skin color—that apparently neutral brown—insulated him from the exoticizing weaknesses that infected the work of local white painters like Hugh Stollmeyer. Stollmeyer, an artist the old man knew and greatly admired since a little boy, was disposed to capturing

people of African descent as essentially physical specimens filled with mysterious spirituality. For this prolific local patriotic artist (as with so many who lived through the amazing interwar age of the “Negro Vogue”), blacks virtually figured as preternatural aesthetic objects. They possessed a primitive beauty, Stollmeyer’s work suggested, and at times, frankly stated. All these black bodies required to realize that their sublimity was rendition by the enlightened modernist artist. All they needed, in other words, were artists like himself.<sup>8</sup>

What if, the researcher retrospectively questioned, the old man in the garage still clung to such fascinated prejudices? What if this artist shared in the enchanted ignorance that has long compromised formidable minds, weakening them with fanciful notions about the exceptional properties of black bodies? In that case, it now occurred to the scholar, the old man might have never regarded him as anything other than phenomenal racial material, a black body, in other words. Despite toting pen, pad and notes, the researcher might have impressed the artist first and foremost as a physique, a welcome piece of visual meat to be eaten, a real twenties modernist might have teased.

The researcher now began looking back in doubt and regret. Leaving the studio might have been the right thing to do. It did not have to be a bolt out of the studio, a move, he later learnt, that would have imitated a scene in an acclaimed novel published at the height of the primitivist vogue. In Claude McKay’s *Banjo* (1930), the character Ray happily holds down a job posing nude for artists (“mostly females”). Things go splendidly until, “one beautiful day,” in the middle of a session he forgets himself and gives in to an erotic memory. Alarmed, he runs off in search of “refuge,” deciding there and then that “only the other sex was qualified for posing in the nude.”<sup>9</sup> No, his exit need not have been that dramatic. A simple polite begging off, followed by a dignified departure. That, he now thought, could have done just fine, could have been the right thing to do. Who knows, he now reflected to wonder to himself, who knows?

## Notes

1. For more archives, authority, and the production of pasts, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 1997).
2. This project eventually saw publication as a monograph, *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2007).

3. Sidney Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (Norton, 1974), 6. For a sense of Mintz's broad and invaluable contribution to scholarship, see *Empirical Futures: Anthropologists and Historians Engage the Work of Sidney Mintz*. Eds. George Baca, Aisha Kan and Stephen Palmié (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). For an "off the books" story of enduring courage in the face of demoralizing violence, see Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, "Anthropology from the Bones: A Memoir of Fieldwork, Survival, and Commitment," *Anthropology and Humanism*, 33, nos. 1–2 (2008): 1–11.
4. On scholarly discussions of the nude, see, for example, Lynda Nead, *Art Obscenity and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992); T. J. Clark, *Painting the Modern World*. R. Leppert, *The Nude: The Cultural Rhetoric of the Body in Western Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2007). John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. For a Caribbeanist take, see Leah Reade Rosenberg, "Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys," *Modernism/Modernity*, 11, no. 2 (April, 2004): 219–238.
5. For a strictly scholarly appreciation of gender and sexuality politics at stake here, a good start would be Leah Reade Rosenberg, "Caribbean Models for Modernism." For more on the nude see R. D. Leppert, *The Nude: The Cultural Rhetoric of the Body in Art in the Art of Western Modernity* (New York: Westview Press, 2007); see also Ronald Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Discourse and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).
6. For a wonderfully ingenious and touching deconstruction of the seriously funny theatrics of Trinidadian masculinity, see the early V.S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street* (New York: Vintage, 1976).
7. See, for example, Kobena Mercer, "Few on my campus could plead ignorance of work like his"; Mercer, in fact, taught at my campus. The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, in *Welcome to The Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Mark Reid, "Renegotiating Black Masculinity," in *PostNegritude Visual and Literary Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).
8. For discussion of tangled contemporary ties among modernist art, race and primitivism during the period, see, for example, Robin D. Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920–1940* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Micol Siegel, Gilbert Joseph and Emily Rosenberg eds., *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
9. Claude McKay, *Banjo* (New York: Mariner Press, 1970), 112.

## Translating Hybrid Cultures: Quandaries of an Indian-Australian Ethnographer in Cuba

*Sujatha Fernandes*

Every time I approach the immigration counter at Havana's José Martí International Airport, a similar scenario plays itself out. "Are you Latina?" I am asked cautiously.

"No."

"So why do you speak Spanish?"

"Because I studied Spanish in the university."

"Then why is your last name Fernandes?"

"My parents are from the part of India in the South that was colonized by the Portuguese," I repeat, almost by rote.

"But you are an Australian citizen." The inquirer is getting a little agitated now.

"Yes, my parents moved to Australia, and I was born there."

"But you live in the United States."

"Yes, I went there to do my PhD."

"So why are you studying Cuba?"

This experience, replayed time and again in several different contexts, illustrates some of the difficulties associated with being an Indian-Australian affiliated with an American university and conducting research on Cuba. It is an experience that undermines the commonly held notion of anthropology as "the act of translating one language or culture into another."<sup>1</sup> What about when there are several different cultures, various institutional paradigms, and even politically opposed nations involved? The question of the immigration

official came back to me on countless occasions: from scholars who believed that if you are not white or a native to the place you are studying, you have less credibility as an ethnographer; from Cubans themselves who were not accustomed to seeing scholars who were not white or Latino/a. It was also a question I asked myself, over and over again.

This chapter is an attempt to answer that question, to point to the fruitfulness of multiple cross-cultural interactions that emerge from anthropological investigations involving more than two cultures, and to suggest some of the implications for how we think about self-reflexivity in fieldwork. I also offer observations about my relationship to “blackness,” as a non-white researcher studying black subjects. How was I perceived in a society with multiple racial designations and how did I self-define in order to find a place for myself within that social spectrum?

To begin, I will briefly summarize the work I carried out in Cuba. I was interested in how Cubans use artistic forms such as film, rap music, and visual arts in order to construct personal worldviews, develop collective understandings about their political interests, and negotiate their demands with the state. Over a period of nine months of field research, I organized ethnographic focus groups with more than seventy-five Cubans in order to analyze film as a site of meaning-making in post-Soviet Cuba. I looked at how Cuban youth have used rap music and public art to debate issues of race and culture in a period of change and contradiction. But I demonstrate how culture and consumption also become crucial arenas for the state to redefine its hegemonic project in a global era, as it reincorporates new and emerging values into dominant frameworks. I employed a range of methodological techniques, including semiotic analysis, open-ended interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork.

While anthropology has dealt with the challenge of the “native” or “indigenous” ethnographer, scholars have not talked about the experiences of the “native” ethnographer doing research in a place that is foreign to her or him. Roger Lancaster acknowledges the importance of framing oneself as located within a particular culture, and allowing discussions of one’s culture to facilitate what he refers to as “a doubly reflexive proposition: our reading of their reading of us.”<sup>2</sup> Yet there is an assumption that the “us” is either the Anglo academy or Western culture, and that this culture is internally coherent and singular.

Several scholars of second-generation immigrant background working from within the American academy have suggested the need

for a rubric to make sense of how they are situated in relation to their object of study, as not quite native to their field of study. Kirin Narayan suggests the term “halfie-ethnography,” and Kamala Visweswaran speaks of “hyphenated ethnography” as a way of describing scholars of mixed cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Visweswaran explains that the term “hyphenated ethnography” can illuminate the relationship between the anthropologist and the field of study, and how the choice to study her parents’ homeland could “shape a return ‘home.’”<sup>4</sup> This is in contrast to the young blond woman that Visweswaran meets on the airplane who made the selection of field location seem like a smorgasbord of choices. “Like, my brother studies Thailand, he’s been there three times already,” Visweswaran describes her as saying. “So where do you want to study?” Yet for Visweswaran this choice is not so simple.<sup>5</sup> I argue that designations such as “halfie” and “hyphenated ethnography” further ossify the motivations for research as based on cultural reasons such as nostalgia or a search for roots, rather than acknowledging the diverse factors that may shape the choice of field location, including political and economic reasons. As the kinds of cross-cultural research that I am engaged in becomes more common in anthropology, we need to search for an adequate language to describe the problems that emerge, and the implications of these problems for how we conceive of doing ethnography.<sup>6</sup>

To solve these problems by employing invented terms for field experiences, such as “native-to-native ethnography” or “hyphenated and hybrid ethnography,” creates a hierarchy of positionality that locates ethnographers depending on their degree of distance from the subject studied. It denies the complex and contradictory forces that shape the ethnographer-informant relationship, to employ one such hyphenation. Similar to the factors of class, education, and institutional power that anthropologists have shown to separate the “native ethnographer” from her/his object of study, the “native ethnographer” doing research in the context of another society must also be situated in those interlocking fields of power and culture. My own field research continually disrupted conventional forms of doing ethnography, and gave me unusual and unexpected insights into my topic. It continually turned me into an object of investigation, making me aware of the politics and implications of doing ethnography, in ways that were only possible because of my particular situation.

On one occasion, I was waiting to meet some friends on the steps of the Capitolio Nacional, a large dome-topped building, home to the Cuban Congress before the revolution, and presently a large tourist

attraction in Central Havana. As I sat on one of the pylons reading a book, I was approached by a family. They were black, dressed in suitably light clothing for the tropics, and the father spoke to me in halting English, asking if they could take a photo with me. I assumed that they were Cuban, and perhaps wanted a photo with a foreigner, so I replied to them in Spanish, saying that they could take the photo. As the father posed with his camera, the mother came to one side of me and the daughter came around the other side, they put their arms around my back, and we all smiled for the camera. The father came to me afterward, and shook my hand, saying again in slow English, “We will have some nice photos to show to our family back home of the lovely Cuban ladies.” I caught the unmistakable lilt of Jamaican English and immediately realized the double misrecognition that had taken place: I thought they were Cuban and they thought that I was Cuban. We both misperceived each other.

This was one of my first lessons in the reciprocal nature of cultural misrecognition. I was amused that this family thought I was Cuban, and would go home to show holiday pictures of a Cuban who was in fact Indian-Australian. But I also realized my own projection of cultural assumptions onto the Jamaican tourists, that all tourists are white and all dark-skinned people are Cuban. As Slavoj Žižek has stated, in cases of mutual misrecognition “*each perceives—without knowing it—the falsity of his/her own subjective position: the deficiency of the other is simply an objectification of the distortion of our own point of view.*”<sup>7</sup> The theoretical interest of my encounter with the Jamaicans is the ways in which our mutual prejudices were materialized in our perception of the other: my assumption that all tourists are white and therefore even a black family taking holiday photos must be Cuban, and the father’s exoticization of me as what he perceived Cuban women to be like.

These kinds of misreadings took place all the time, throughout the period of my fieldwork. It was not absurd that I be mistaken for a Cuban. Many Cubans, particularly in the eastern province of Santiago de Cuba, have features that are very similar to East Indians, and I would often be asked if I was *Santiaguerra*, or from Santiago.

By contrast, in the local agricultural markets in Vedado where I did my food shopping, the vendors were familiar with me but they could not quite place me or my accent. When I approached they would shout, “*Arabe? China? Argentina?*” They tossed out all the possibilities, and I would just smile at them and shake my head, keeping up the game. At times, when I carried out interviews with Cubans, and they had heard my last name Fernandes prior to the interview, many

assumed that I was Latina, and I would get the insider references to “us Latinos.” Again, I did not explicitly deny or reinforce these offered alliances, but instead capitalized on the elusiveness of my identity.

But sometimes the misrecognition was more intrusive, and it put me in a position that revealed facets of Cuban society that may not have been possible but for this misrecognition. The first time was when I walked into a bar in Havana with my sister during my first week in Havana. The proprietors told us to leave. Looking around we noticed that there were no Cubans in the bar, and that it was full of foreigners. My sister, who had already lived in Havana for a year, was angry and she spoke to the proprietor in English, asking him why he maintained such racist policies against Cubans. The proprietor, clearly embarrassed, apologized profusely and invited us to stay, but we had no intention of doing so. The emergence of a strong division between tourists and foreigners since the introduction of a tourist economy in the contemporary period of crisis has taken on racialized overtones: if a white Cuban were to enter the bar it is unlikely that he or she would have been stopped unless it was obvious that they were Cuban.

This experience was repeated numerous times during my fieldwork. I would be asked to leave hotel lobbies, bars, and I would even get harassed by police officials when walking along the main strip of the Malecon, and told to cross to the other side of the street. It reached the point where I felt uncomfortable to enter hotels, and I would ask people to meet me outside, or I would immediately speak English rather than Spanish when I entered a tourist establishment, so as to differentiate myself. English, and being foreign, was my escape valve, and yet I realized that most Cubans of color would not even have this option of escape to the safety of foreign identity.

If being mistaken for Cuban gave me some insights into the workings of racism in the contemporary period of crisis, the inability of Cubans most of the time to locate me in any defined category was always a topic of debate. During the period of my field research I learned how to define myself and how *not* to define myself in specific contexts. Early on I realized that when I entered libraries, archives, and government offices and presented myself as a graduate student from the United States, people immediately tuned out what I was saying.

Given the history of U.S. economic and political dominance, as well as the constant anti-American rhetoric in the Cuban media, Cubans were less willing to open up to someone associated with the United States. I also realized that when people asked me where I was

from and I replied “Australia,” which usually generated a blank look. “*Que?? Austria? donde esta?*” (“What?? Austria? Where’s that??”) Conversely, when I told people that I was from India it generated a warm reception, and led to a long conversation. Although Cuba has few formal ties with India like those it has with certain third world nations in Africa, as well as China and Vietnam, the Cuban people expressed a general interest in India. As a result of the high level of education of Cuban people, and the attempts by the Cuban government to educate the population about other third world countries, people actually knew quite a lot about India and they would ask informed questions about caste and gender, about practices of dowry and sati, and about progressive movements for change within India. I spoke comfortably with Cubans about India because I spent quite a bit of time there as a child and conducted ethnographic field research there as a graduate student for two prior projects.

Part of my motivation to work in Cuba rather than in India was the greater degree of freedom I had as a female ethnographer in Cuba. During my time in India, I stayed with different families, and each time I had conflicts with them over my ability to move around. Growing up in Australia, I was fairly used to being independent, but in India, as a young Indian woman, I was subject to the same patriarchal limitations and familial protectiveness as other Indian women. Lila Abu Lughod suggests that while living as an Arab American woman under the protection of a family of Bedouins in the western desert of Egypt was restricting to her freedoms, it simultaneously gave her “advantages of access and unexpected pleasures of intimacy in the women’s world.”<sup>8</sup> Other native and second-generation female anthropologists have similarly accepted this limitation, and have tended to work on topics related to women and the middle class in which they will be accepted.<sup>9</sup>

I wanted to do research on Maoist naxalite political parties in Bihar and West Bengal. Yet, I abandoned this topic to look at gender and caste in the hill districts of Uttarakhand in order to adapt to my situation. Given these restrictions, I eventually switched my research to Cuba, where I did not face such problems. In Cuba I was free to wear what I pleased, and although I stayed with a Cuban family, they did not mind if I was out for three days without calling, and when I returned home after my sojourns they would simply give me a wink and say conspiratorially, “*pa’ la calle?*” (“You were in the streets?”)

The greater freedom for young women to move about in Cuba is related to more openness in relation to sexuality, but I also realized that there are ways that intimacy in Cuba is more restricted than in

India. A friend of mine was working as a translator for the World Youth Festival in July 1997, a gathering of socialist and progressive youth organizations from around the world. My friend was in charge of the Indian youth delegation. When she went to the airport to pick them up, they were all men in their forties who came out of the airport in pairs, holding each other's hands. From my experience in India, I knew that most of these men were part of the Communist Party of India or Marxist (CPI-M), and that most of the members of the youth league were over forty. But my friend was shocked, and she exclaimed that the Indians had sent a gay delegation instead of a youth delegation.

The episode illustrates more of the cross-cultural differences: in India it is quite normal for male friends to hold hands while walking down the street, or walking along the beach, in a way that is not common between men and women. But while in Cuba men and women can kiss in public and fondle each other, male friends do not normally hold hands. As I explained this to my Cuban friends, it appeared to me that, again, I was doing the work of cultural translation of my "native" culture for Cubans, an act that seemed the reverse of what ethnography is usually about. I also realized that for gender reasons I had found Cuba a more appealing place to do fieldwork than India, but that perhaps if I were not heterosexual I may not have found Cuba as hospitable for research.

For Cubans I was not Australian or American. Cubans identified me with India rather than Australia or America because it fits with their shared established categories of identity. But these categories can themselves erase difference. Whenever I told people I was from "*La India*" they would respond with, "*Si, tu eres Hindu*" ("Yes, you are Hindu"). After a while I stopped trying to explain to people that Hinduism is the main religion of India, but that being Indian is not synonymous with being Hindu, in fact there are many different religions in India, and my family happens to be Catholic. At some point, I realized that the term "*Hindu*" was used to differentiate east Indians from the indigenous people of the Americas who were referred to as "*Los Indios*." But while I "performed" "Indianness" for Cubans, I did not always feel comfortable with that identity when I told them about Indian history, culture, and social norms. The Portuguese architecture, colorful buildings, and palm trees of Mangalore where my parents are from; the diet of coconut, guava, pork, and chouriço; and the rhythmic dance and guitar music that are the staple of Manglorean Catholic culture actually remind me much more of Cuba

than the traditional Hindu culture. Maybe if sometimes I blended in as a Cuban it was because there was a part of that culture that resonated with what was familiar to me.

Cubans perceived me as Indian because it helped to relate to me, and to know me more intimately because of presumed shared experiences. At first I resisted these categorizations as a kind of misrepresentation, but it soon became clear that in this context such labels were not only academically helpful, but they reinforced a political connection between me and my informants. It may have been duplicitous to assume an identity that I would not have in Australia or America, but as Abu-Lughod describes in her experience of building relationships based on a common history and set of experiences, “I *became* the person that I was with them.”<sup>10</sup>

During one conversation with some Cuban rappers, they told me that they would not easily trust a Westerner, particularly an American, but they felt comfortable opening up to me. The mutual strictures of national belonging and race that shape the experiences of a young black Cuban became apparent to me through the work on rap music, and on the one hand, my ambiguous identity helped me to overcome the blocks that restrict communication across cultures.

On the other hand, I was also conducting research from an academic context with fairly established hostility toward Cuba and from an institution with a stigma among many progressive groups throughout Latin America. The University of Chicago is known throughout the region as the place where the “Chicago School” doctrines of neoliberal economic reform were developed, and most of the young economists leading the harsh market reforms in countries such as Chile and Nicaragua were trained there.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these historical connotations, I faced real dilemmas over how I could situate myself within mainstream academic discourse that presumed that the Cuban socialist system was a dictatorship, and functioned through brute force and repression, when the daily reality as I experienced it was not this at all. As Smadar Lavie has noted, “The discourse of social science itself is part of corporate academic culture—the scholar must maneuver within an academic convention of depoliticized objectivity.”<sup>12</sup> In the case of Cuba, it is not a *depoliticized* objectivity, but a highly politicized “objectivity.” I constantly faced pressure to represent the Cuban experience within Cold War paradigms that were insufficient then, and are markedly so in the present period.

Despite all of the problems involved with doing ethnography from an ambiguous subject position, in a foreign country, I still knew that I

had to find a way to “engage my voice with the voices” of the Cuban men and women who I was studying,<sup>13</sup> to be able to achieve what James Clifford has referred to as “a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances.”<sup>14</sup> Although I was a nonblack researcher, my ambiguous status still gave me insights into the workings of race and power in Cuba, such as when I was mistaken for being Cuban and excluded from tourist venues. At times, I participated in those constructions of the “other,” like when I mistook a Jamaican tourist family for Afro-Cubans, based on my assumption that all tourists are white. The experience of being situated within multiple discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and nation gives rise to a hypersensitivity about the ethnographic endeavor, but can also generate fruitful and unexpected glimpses into daily interactions at other times.

## Notes

1. Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 132.
2. Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 28.
3. See, Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a Native Anthropologist?” *American Anthropologist*, 95, no. 3 (Sept 1993): 671–686 and Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, 127.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 140.
6. For a discussion of cross-cultural research in anthropology, see Lok Siu, “Lessons from the Field: Being Chinese American in Panama,” in Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (ed.), *Encounters: People of Asian Descent in the Americas* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999).
7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 64.
8. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 16.
9. Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony, and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
10. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 19.
11. Richard Gott, *In the Shadow of the Liberator: Hugo Chávez and the Transformation of Venezuela* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 53.

12. Smadar Lavie, *The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity Under Israeli and Egyptian Rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 35.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in James Clifford and George Marcus eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 12.

## Where to Find Black Identity in Buenos Aires

*Judy Anderson*

While doing fieldwork, the scholar inevitably inserts herself into the personal histories of those with whom she works. The relationships formed between researchers and research participants are the negotiations of mountains of differences as the two groups discover where their paths converge and diverge. These differences provide a rich context for the growth of the scholar and also for the emergence of new theoretical ideas, especially for anthropologists of color. As Faye Harrison describes,

[m]ultiple consciousness and vision are rooted in some combination and interpenetration of national, racial, sexual, or class oppressions. This form of critical consciousness emerges from the tension between, on one hand, membership in a Western society, a Western-dominated profession, or a relatively privileged class or social category, and, on the other hand, belonging to or having an organic relationship with an oppressed social category or people.<sup>1</sup>

During my research, I always made a sincere effort to build real social relationships with people, which required a considerable investment of time. This often involved simple acts like stopping by a consultant's house for a brief visit if I were within thirty minutes of travel and had at least an hour to devote to them. Additionally, I truly listened to what they said, whether it was critique, praise, complaints, all the while taking copious notes. Immersing myself in the everyday lives of local blacks in Buenos Aires helped me educe their

understandings of blackness and their place in Argentina's racial landscape.

In this chapter, I describe Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina as having converging and diverging diasporic identities. Drawing on Faye Harrison's work, I apply a diasporic framework to my analysis, which "allows anthropologists to apply to the study of black life a diachronic and global perspective that is especially sensitive to and cognizant of the part racial exploitation has played in the expansion, consolidation, and 'modernization' of capitalism."<sup>2</sup>

Because of my subject position as a black woman raised in the United States and researching the African diaspora in Latin America, I have a personal connection and interest in the lives of my research informants, Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina. I wanted to be involved in the activities of the black political and social organizations as a resident of Buenos Aires and as a researcher. My involvement also helped me feel less isolated and gave me a sense of belonging within a community of activists. Furthermore, as a participant-observer in these organizations I was able to reciprocate with the people I researched for sharing information and their lives with me. I was cautious about the organizations with which I affiliated because I was well aware of the rumors and distrust within black organizations regarding their leadership. I attended a few meetings with various organizations and learned more about them before I committed to any projects. This meant that I frequently found myself spending time with people whose ideas and perspectives varied greatly from my own.

In an environment of interethnic conflict, forming certain relationships inevitably would force me to sacrifice others. Interestingly, most of my informants did not necessarily see me as taking any particular side; instead, they saw me as an outsider who most likely did not fully understand the Argentine political landscape. I maneuvered in and out of the various feuding camps practically unscathed. Convincing people to donate their time to a research project is an accomplishment in itself. The frustration involved in sorting out the messiness of the field experience gave way to a more thoughtful analysis of black identity in Buenos Aires.

## On Race, Gender, and Research in Buenos Aires

As a black woman researching the African diaspora in Argentina, there is an element of self-reflexivity involved in my research. By

including the personal in my work I can take abstract concepts and make them more real.<sup>3</sup> By practicing what Irma McClaurin calls autoethnography, I can provide a uniquely “native” theoretical perspective for interpreting my research.<sup>4</sup> As a type of near-native anthropologist or “halfie,” which Lila Abu-Lughod defines as a person “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage,” I am immersed deeply in my positionalities and cannot avoid them.<sup>5</sup> Thus, I make my hybridity transparent in my work by situating myself as a subject “simultaneously touched by life experience and swayed by professional concerns.”<sup>6</sup> As Harrison highlights, the “multiple consciousness based on nationality, race, color, class, and gender can be heightened by ethnographic experience and then in turn converted into a useful research instrument.”<sup>7</sup>

Self-reflexivity does not always insinuate a positive experience for the researcher. Black women, in particular, can be the subject of heightened or more overtly sexualized and racialized harassment in the Latin American context due to the interplay between race, class, and gender in these nations. In her research in Brazil, Kia Lilly Caldwell notes that these personalized experiences with racism can convert our theoretical understandings of gender and race in the African diaspora to experiential ones.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, she emphasizes that “reflexive examination of our multiple identities and positionalities is essential to developing theory and practice that is informed by and relevant to the realities of African diaspora communities.”<sup>9</sup> France Winddance Twine faced similar problems in Brazil as both nonblacks and blacks who did not know her often assumed she was a prostitute.<sup>10</sup> As a single black female researcher, many of the same assumptions were made about me. Yet, these types of incidents present opportunities for scholarly growth. Harrison reminds us that the peripheral space created by such trials in the field also can be “a creatively variegated space in which scholars—among them racial minorities, women, Third World, and left-wing activists—have pursued important new developments.”<sup>11</sup> These types of negative field encounters not only help anthropologists empathize with their research informants but also provide a better understanding of local racial politics.

Going into the field, I knew my own identity would create another layer of interest in my research. As a Liberian adopted by a single white mother from Pennsylvania and raised in Texas, I found my own constellation of identifications engaged in contested ways throughout my fieldwork in Buenos Aires. I anticipated that my blackness

would facilitate my gaining access to local black populations, but I did not anticipate to what degree my American-ness would create obstacles for my research. Caldwell describes similar experiences during her field work in Brazil in which her national identity as a U.S. citizen created distance between her and her Afro-Brazilian activist research participants.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, during his research in Brazil, Michael Hanchard realized that as black scholars from the United States, our own bodies are contested sites of local race relations and “vectors for the confluence of race, gender, and national identity.”<sup>13</sup> While the American aspect of my identity posed challenges, I had not considered how my African-ness would play into the local interethnic dynamics.

Local black ethnic blocs generally view Africans as hardworking, intelligent, and savvy entrepreneurs. Interestingly, African immigrants were the only ones that thought of me as an African. Afro-Latinos, including Afro-Argentines, saw me as an American, which created a tension that was not present with African immigrants. Argentines of African descent interact with Americans with caution, and rightly so. Afro-Argentines, in particular, expressed the feeling that they have been exploited by local nonblack social scientists as well as foreign black and nonblack researchers. Still, there is some degree of empathy that blacks have toward African American scholars since they think of the United States as an extremely racist society in which the existence of a black professional is an anomaly.

Argentina’s outwardly chauvinistic society posed challenges for my research mobility as an African American woman. I was violating cultural norms of gendered behavior by traveling alone, working to support myself, and wanting to live alone. In addition, all the sexual myths of the black woman seemed amplified in Argentina because of the belief that Afro-Argentine women no longer exist. Therefore, black women are perceived as a more exotic rarity and, therefore, even more deserving of constant harassment and sexual taunts.

Blacks in Argentina tend to characterize nonblack Argentines as racist and extremely discriminatory, and, indeed, I experienced racist treatment from nonblack Argentines. During the first half of my stay, I lived in a middle-class neighborhood in the center of the city, which is mostly populated by local Euro-Argentines and white tourists. In that area, I experienced very little racialized harassment, likely due to the common presence of tourists. I then moved to a working-class neighborhood full of *criollo* (of mixed descent) Argentines, as well as Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Afro-Dominican immigrants. My

immediate African-descendant and nonblack neighbors in this neighborhood (mostly immigrants) treated me well or indifferently, but once I left the neighborhood and entered the business areas, I was harassed constantly with sexualized racial taunts and other racist acts. At first, I made it a point to correct such behaviors with a brief comment on their racist nature, but I quickly realized that doing this on a daily basis was just too exhausting and time-consuming. It seems that race outweighs class in a society that views itself as nonracist due to the perceived absence of its native population of Afro-descendants.

Blackness, of course, does not give a scholar immediate access to black people. Research relationships, like all social interactions, must be negotiated.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps more troubling than racialized elements of my identity was my nationality. American-ness is troublesome everywhere as we carry the politics, particularly the racial politics, of the United States with us. Harrison notes that in addition to color, class, gender, and nationality can affect how research participants receive the researcher. Consequently, both must constantly negotiate their roles.<sup>15</sup> Tony Whitehead makes a similar assertion based on his fieldwork in Jamaica.<sup>16</sup> Both of these African American scholars had to adjust their behavior and attitudes to local perceptions of their identities.

For many of my informants and acquaintances, I was even more suspect as an American because I did not fit the stereotype of a typical American researcher. My informants assumed that American scholars have ample funding for their research. I had to repeatedly explain that I had no funding and was working several part-time jobs (teaching English and cooking for families) to support myself. American visitors to Argentina also typically come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, but I come from a single-parent working-class background. While I conducted my research, I used public transportation, resided in a working-class neighborhood, and never traveled to exotic tourist destinations. I also did not resemble what they believed to be typically American. I have dark brown skin and coarse hair.

My inability to meet the prerequisites of American-ness seemed to confuse many of my informants more than anything. One capricious African leader suddenly stopped communicating with me because he concluded that I must be a spy.<sup>17</sup> Peggy Golde describes this as a common accusation of anthropologists as a mode of defensive behavior or resistance on the part of the host community and a way for a group to preserve itself. She explains, "These accusations and suspicions have frequently been explained as reactions to an ambiguous figure

or as the result of prior negative contact with foreigners.”<sup>18</sup> Blacks in Argentina are no strangers to social scientists, both Argentine and foreign, who seek to make black Argentines the focus of their research. What I found most surprising is that my American-ness outweighed my blackness in the minds of the majority of my research informants.

## Finding a Room of My Own

In Buenos Aires, as in other major cities around the world, the neighborhood in which a person resides is believed to tell volumes about who she is as a person, not just her class level, but also her disposition and pastimes. My first priority upon arrival in Buenos Aires was to find adequate housing to facilitate my research, which was difficult to accomplish from the United States because I only had access to tourist-priced apartments. Fortunately, Carla, an Afro-Brazilian research consultant in her late thirties who I had met during my preliminary fieldwork, offered me a room in her home.

Carla lived in a rapidly gentrifying zone of a large middle-class neighborhood in the northwestern part of the city with her preteen daughter, her mother, and husband. Increased tourism in the area had caused a dramatic rise in property values and cost of living. Investors had opened a bevy of trendy clothing boutiques catering to crowds of Western tourists spending in dollars and euros. Carla had bought her modestly sized house over ten years ago when it was practically in ruins and on the verge of being destroyed. At that time, the neighborhood was just another slowly rotting, ignored sector of the city. She invested the time and money to turn it into a warm, inhabitable, and inviting home. It is rare for blacks to own homes in the capital city, and a black woman owning a two-story home in that neighborhood is even more unusual.

Though I was grateful for Carla’s generosity, I knew my lifestyle as a young, independent researcher would not coordinate well with the quiet family life she had created at home. I needed to be able to come home at all hours of the night and have regular phone and Internet access. Additionally, Carla was in the middle of some major home renovations that were months behind schedule due to the shoddy work of various contractors. Nonetheless, Carla opened her home even though it was neither the best timing for her and her family nor the ideal housing for ease of mobility and technology. I accepted

Carla's generous offer, but I knew the living arrangements would be short-term.

Before entering the field, my dream was to live in a black neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Afro-Argentines used to be found in high concentrations near Rio de la Plata in the southeast neighborhoods of San Telmo and Monserrat,<sup>19</sup> but today, they are rarely found living in Buenos Aires. They are now located in very small numbers scattered throughout the city, but the highest concentration lives just outside of its borders in the adjacent neighborhoods of the province of Buenos Aires. Members of black immigrant blocs are scattered throughout the city but also are situated in higher concentrations in the same southeast neighborhoods Afro-Argentines once inhabited during the colonial era. These areas are mostly populated by working-class and working-poor residents, both foreign and Argentine. The dominant society characterizes these neighborhoods as dangerous, rundown, having too many immigrants, and being the center of illegal activities related to drugs and prostitution. Most of my friends and acquaintances thought I was crazy for trying so hard to find housing in these districts.

Moving to a new apartment was much more complicated than I anticipated, because it is very difficult to buy or even rent housing inside the capital city. All property owners require renters to put up a *garantía* (collateral to rent). This *garantía* is often more than double the value of the property the individual seeks to rent. Those who do not have immediate access to inherited wealth usually list the property of a family member, oftentimes in the interior of the country. Property owners make exceptions to this practice for tourists who are simply charged several times the normal rental fee. Individuals with limited networks, social capital, and income are shut out of renting. Many working poor and immigrants take up accommodation in the city's cheap hotels on a weekly or monthly basis, where their own safety and that of their belongings are in constant jeopardy. They are also very vulnerable to the whims of hotel managers and can be thrown out onto the street at any point without much notice. Blacks are disproportionately represented among Argentina's poor, and structural racism has prevented their access to "free"<sup>20</sup> education, getting higher-paying jobs, and even living inside Buenos Aires.

After realizing that it would not be possible for me to rent an apartment through typical means, I went to my research contacts to

find help with housing. I met Gisela through her boyfriend Fabian, a musician who is a first-generation Afro-Argentine from an Afro-Uruguayan father and a Euro-Argentine mother. Gisela's mother Francisca is an Afro-Argentine descended from enslaved Africans, and her father Teodoro is an Argentine descendant of Italian immigrants. Gisela knew I was in need of housing, so she asked her parents if they would be willing to rent me her old room in their apartment. Though they had not rented out any of their rooms in the past, they empathized with my situation and allowed me to live with them. I lived in their home nestled in a working-class area of the city for six months, until the end of my research stay.

Living among blacks was the best way to observe what daily life was like for them in the city. I had always lived in a very ethnically and racially diverse environment, so my new neighborhood on the southeast side of the city felt more like home with its mix of Afro-Latinos, Asians, indigenous people, and *criollos*. There was something extremely comforting about walking home and always seeing a number of black people about their business on the streets, shopping, working, and just hanging out. Furthermore, I was not subjected to the same level of constant stares, barrage of racist comments, and discriminatory treatment as I was in other areas of the city. The residents were friendly, polite, and trusting of me even though they did not know me personally. I once bought some eye-contact solution at a pharmacy in the area, and the pharmacist said I could pay him the next day if I did not have enough money at the time. I knew this was not the norm in the typical big-city neighborhood. My new neighborhood was no safe haven either. There was a murder up the block from my apartment and an armed robbery around the corner, but I still found myself feeling more at home there than anywhere else.

Reflecting on my housing situation, if I had received the funding I requested for research, it would have been easy to opt for a posh apartment in a mid to upper-class neighborhood, which would have made it more challenging to break out of the quintessential outsider mode. According to my research informants, this is what many American scholars they had encountered in Buenos Aires did. Other anthropologists have made similar choices in housing as I did, independent of their economic situations to better understand the communities they research.<sup>21</sup> As a result of my living situation, I was thankfully in a position where I could be more receptive and perceptive of the racial dynamics around me. My struggles enhanced my experiences.

## Blackness in a Country Where “There Are No Blacks”

My views of race going into the field, of course, influenced how I approached my research. I was not just looking for people who I would personally categorize as African and Afro-descendant, but those who considered themselves to fall within these categories in a country where they might have been able to pass as other ethnicities. I was not raised in African American culture. I learned what I know about it more through independent research than personal experiences or the formal education system. Growing up as an African outside of an African community, I was automatically placed in the category of black, though I was not readily accepted by the majority of my African American peers. This is not to say we did not share common experiences of discrimination, isolation, or even similar class backgrounds. However, from my own life experience in the United States, I knew how slippery the category of blackness could be. I came to understand race to be an exclusionary category that creates communities of displaced individuals at the same time that it could be a unifying principle.

Most of the individuals in my sample were African and Afro-descendant and were recruited through snowball sampling. I see these people as part of larger diasporas; thus I applied a diasporic framework in selecting them. Harrison explains that this approach is “dynamic and flexible enough to recognize that forms of racial/class oppression vary over time and space, and that various historically-specific intersections of race and class may give rise to situations wherein a distinctive ‘black’ racial identity does not obtain.”<sup>22</sup> My research participants might not see themselves as part of a diaspora or even as Afro-descendants. Harrison goes on to explain that

even where “race” is not a major organizing principle or structural feature, the diaspora concept suggests that historical ties to Africa and/or the legacy of slavery, plantation agriculture, and the “triangular trade” (E. Williams 1944) may have had some direct or indirect impact upon regional and national patterns of sociocultural and economic development.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, this approach allows my research to be informed by a critical examination of history and how various historical events inform the creation and maintenance of larger societal structures, which affect the micropolitics of identity in Argentina.

Finding blacks in Buenos Aires seemed like a daunting challenge at first, but I began by identifying some key leaders among the black organizations through online research. I was able to locate the majority of informants through recommendations from others. I quickly realized that blacks are scattered throughout Buenos Aires rather than concentrated in ethnic enclaves. The majority of them are not members of formalized social groups or nongovernment organizations. My methods, then, could not be solely centered on the activities of organized groups. In light of this, I attended as many events associated with black themes as possible. I soon discovered that events labeled *Afro* are popular in the city but rarely have people of Afro-descent in attendance or running them. I participated in the activities of local black associations, and as more people found out about me and my research, they began to notify me about events that would be of interest. I also spoke to Argentine scholars researching similar topics, and I reached out to people at local embassies who had an interest in my research. Specifically, I communicated with representatives of the embassies of the United States and South Africa. Both embassies created programming in an attempt to connect with local blocs of Africans and Afro-descendants.

## The Participant Observer in Action

Participant observation has become the cornerstone of what is considered sound anthropological research. Yet it is often unclear exactly what one does as a participant observer. I found myself doing a lot of socializing. I socialized in homes, workplaces, restaurants, bars, parks, cultural centers, schools, and sometimes even hospitals. There is a great time investment involved in the work of anthropology. It takes time for the researcher to recognize patterns, gain people's trust, prove she can be a useful community member, and turn research informants into field-site friends.

Though scholars working with community organizations often do not take on such active roles as I did, I felt the project necessitated a more intense degree of participation for several reasons. As a black woman living in Argentina, I was very familiar and empathetic with the concerns of my research informants. As McClaurin reminds us,

[w]e construct a complex ethnographic world from our data, our field experiences, our knowledge as "natives," halfies, woman, other, that is contradictory, multilayered, engaged, and as close to representing

the social reality of the people we study as we can get. This strategy not only reshapes ethnographic practice but transforms it into ethnographic praxis (action).<sup>24</sup>

The organizations with which I worked closely were addressing experiences and issues we shared as racialized and marginalized individuals living in Argentina. My participation provided a chance for increasing the camaraderie between me as a researcher and those I studied as well as helped diminish my feelings of isolation as a black person residing in a city where blacks are the constant targets of everyday racist practices. Finally, by taking a more active role with the local black organizations, I was able to reciprocate for their assistance with my research project. Overall, I would classify my close involvement with these organizations as a variation of participant observation rather than any overt effort in taking an active role in local racial politics. I recognized that ultimately I was a temporary resident, and because of that status, I could not commit to any agenda at the same level as the locals. While I helped plant the seeds of various initiatives, I would not be present to deal with the repercussions.

By the time I completed my field work and prepared to depart, I found it tempting to embrace the cynical perception of non-Argentine black informants, as a society that is *atrasada* or “behind” in terms of race relations. The racist encounters and treatment that are part of the everyday lives of blacks in Argentine society are almost tantamount to what many young people would consider pre-Civil Rights era folklore in the United States. Argentina is definitely facing many challenges in dealing with its multiethnic past and present. There are many parallels that can be made with blacks in other parts of the Americas, but particularities in economic development, major political shifts with military rule, and a contrived historical erasure of Afro-descendants are more than just nuances that must be taken into consideration. Through the time I spent with Africans and Afro-descendants in the country, I witnessed and shared in the painfully deep and psychologically taxing experiences of exclusion and isolation. I partially attribute the recent mobilization around black identity and the revaluation of blackness to the social and political exclusion felt by Africans and Afro-descendants in the cultural landscape of Argentina.

Identity formation is a continuous process that carries us through many different transformations and ways of identifying in a lifetime.<sup>25</sup> It is also something whose subtleties can be highlighted and made

more accessible through ethnography. Through the following three vignettes, I demonstrate how, as a researcher, I navigated the terrains of blackness in interactions with Africans and Afro-descendants in Argentina. The first describes a cultural fair where representatives of the different immigrant populations in Argentina set up stands with traditional goods. I talk about my experience working at the event with Carla, an Afro-Brazilian who has lived in Argentina for about fifteen years. The next one takes place at the Nigerian Democracy Day celebration where I had been chosen by the organizers to be the mistress of ceremonies partially because of my African roots. The final account is of a racist encounter described to me by Francisca, an Afro-Argentine research consultant with whom I resided for several months. My experiences in the field reveal the ways in which black identities are being reworked in a nation where the presence of Afro-Argentines has been denied since Argentina's independence in 1816.

## Working the Cultural Fair

I was residing with Carla when one evening she told me she wanted to resume participating in the city's *ferias de colectividades* or cultural fairs. These state-sponsored events are an attempt to create a public discourse of multiculturalism while maintaining the racial hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> They were originally conceptualized as a way for Argentines to become familiar with immigrant cultures and to integrate the immigrants into Argentine society. Carla is a creative woman with a wide array of talents including the production of traditional Brazilian arts and crafts and Brazilian food. Five years prior, she was more involved with the fairs when the state government had demonstrated a greater interest in educating the public about different cultures. The fairs were taken over by private Argentine companies more concerned with profits than cultural awareness. Though there are several fairs conveniently close to her home, Carla said she could not attend those. She felt other people in the fair circuit would find out and gossip that she was too good to sell at the fairs in more working-class neighborhoods farther away from downtown. Carla does, after all, reside in what recent years has become one of the trendiest neighborhoods in the city of Buenos Aires.

I volunteered to help Carla run her tent at the fair as a way to pay her back for her generosity. It was also a great research opportunity that would allow me to observe interethnic interactions in that setting. We attended a very large and popular fair in a large neighborhood

located on the western border of the capital. The local attendees of the event typically are employed as maids, bus drivers, and construction workers. In Carla's tent, she sold dolls, home décor, and food. By selling goods at the fair, she generated some extra income to help support her family.

Carla put me in charge of greeting potential customers and helping explain what the food items contained. Argentine fairgoers would ask a lot of specific questions about Brazilian life and culture. Sometimes, they would even fondly mention a vacation they or a relative had taken in Brazil, all with the assumption that I was Brazilian. At first, I was quick to politely explain that I am actually from the United States and not Brazilian, but this just seemed to confuse fairgoers and put a damper on the whole fantasy of Brazil into which I was already incorporated. Argentines conflate Brazilian with black and even use the terms interchangeably to describe Brazilians. After a few of these encounters, Carla and I realized that it was my mistaken identity that was helping her goods sell so well. It was more beneficial to her sales for me to not correct the customers. I am friendly and personable and somewhat knowledgeable about the Brazilian products I was selling because of what I had learned from Carla. I also speak Portuguese, wear my hair in braids, and am dark skinned. Even more insinuating was the fact that I was working at a Brazilian tent, dressed in the colors of the Brazilian flag, and selling Brazilian products alongside Brazilians at a cultural fair.

Soon, Carla started doubting if attending the fairs was truly worth all of the trouble. Fairs are expensive to attend if a vendor does not sell a high quantity of goods. Additionally, they are located quite far from her home, and the roundtrip transportation is costly. After about three fairs, Carla decided they were too much of an expense and inconvenience for her to participate. I did, however, appreciate the opportunity to have attended a cultural fair before her retirement and learned much in the process about Argentines' imaginaries of blackness as being something quintessentially Brazilian.

### MC'ing Nigerian Democracy Day

One of the many friends I made during my time in Argentina was David, the vice president of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina. He worked in an office downtown near one of the places I taught English. I would sometimes drop by to speak or have coffee with him and find out about the latest happenings in the organization. I only

attended his group's meeting once because they met late in the evenings at David's house, which was located on the eastern, less-maintained outskirts of the city. On one visit to David's office, he invited me to one of the largest events of the year, Nigerian Democracy Day, which would take place the following week. I recalled that during the meeting I attended, an elderly gentleman emphasized that this year's Democracy Day event must go well because it would be important for improving the image of Africans in Argentina. David wanted my assurance that I would be there, so I confirmed that I would and that I would photograph the event for him. He even called me the day before to remind me.

The Nigerian Democracy Day celebration is an annual event held at the end of May and hosted by the Nigerian Organization. Every year, the location changes depending on the free space the city government lets them use. The year I attended, the organization was allocated a choice location in the middle of one of the busiest business districts of downtown. The building additionally had the advantage of belonging to the state's largest and most prestigious university. These factors helped contribute to the attendance of over 200 guests, though the start time of five o'clock meant that many people had to leave work early to attend. Like a good American, I arrived at the hour the event was to begin, prepared with my camera and camcorder. However, the event started late because we waited for one of the panelists to finish teaching a class.

When I arrived, David nervously ran over to where I was seated near the front of the room to remind me that I would be introducing the panelists. Supposedly, we had discussed this plan the previous day. I did not recall ever agreeing to be the master of ceremonies for the event, and was not familiar with any of the panelists. To make matters worse, I was completely unprepared and inappropriately dressed to speak in front of a crowd and represent a respectable association. I tried to get out of it by suggesting some other members in attendance, but both David and Paul, the president of the organization, insisted. I reluctantly accepted and took my place at the end of the table at the front of the room. Fortunately, my role as announcer went relatively smoothly.

I could not help but wonder why the leaders of the Nigerian Organization of Argentina were so insistent on having me play the role of master of ceremonies. I later found out that Paul and David had a conversation on who would be appropriate to announce the event. A few years prior, they had invited Claudia, an intelligent local

Afro-Argentine leader of Cape Verdean descent who figures prominently in the media, to serve as mistress of ceremonies. They soon discovered that they did not agree with the way she was operating within the black ethnic blocs, and cut off communication with her shortly afterwards. The previous year, they had Antonio, an eloquent and confident young Afro-Uruguayan member of a local black NGO. Because he is openly gay, which David described as a “defect,” the other African men were not happy with him representing the organization in that public forum.

Before Nigerian Democracy Day, I had conducted a few formal and informal interviews with the president and vice president of the organization, but nothing had led me to anticipate that I would be included in the organization’s activities in this manner. I also had attended a small number of their events, but in none of these had I imagined that they had claimed me as a fellow member. It seemed, however, that I had suddenly become Nigerian by some sort of popular vote. Either that or my African origin was enough of a compelling reason for my inclusion. Though I had already explained to the leaders that I was raised outside of African culture, I still was treated as a long-lost African daughter who just needed some guidance to rediscover her roots. During her fieldwork in Nigeria, Gloria Marshall experienced similar treatment by her Nigerian research informants as a long lost relative from far away. As a Bahamian who was raised in South Florida, Marshall did not meet African ideas of an American who they thought of as white and Southern Baptist since that was all they had been exposed to in 1961.<sup>27</sup> Similar to my situation, her status as a single black woman prompted her African hosts to take care of her as if she were a family member.

The presentation of certificates of recognition at the end of the event confirmed my speculations. My certificate was announced last, and Paul very enthusiastically presented it to me. He made a very nice commentary on how happy he was to have an African sister in Argentina doing research on blacks and participating in this event. He then thanked me with a big warm hug and kiss on the cheek. I was now being celebrated for being an African in Argentina.

## Living with Blackness

The way I met Francisca stands out from how I met my other research informants. I was in a small bar watching Fabian perform Cuban music with a small band of musicians. Fabian’s sister was also in

attendance, and she introduced me to his girlfriend Gisela who was watching the performance with her parents. I looked to the back of the tiny, dark, crowded bar and noticed that Gisela's mother appeared to be a very light skinned Afro-descendant. I asked Gisela, and she confirmed that her mother is Afro-Argentine. I later arranged to do an interview with both of them at Gisela's apartment.

During my formal interview with Francisca, she made it seem as if race was never much of an issue in her life, though she recognized herself as being an Afro-descendant. She spoke of her two-decades-long career as a computer programmer for a French company, and her experiences of being treated very well by everyone there. She spoke of how she had recently heard a radio interview with a known Argentine scholar who researches Afro-Argentines and was enthusiastic about sharing this information with me. She also mentioned attending a classical music concert featuring compositions by Joseph Boulogne who is known as the "black Mozart."

Francisca, in her sixties, then went into some detail about her family history. She talked about growing up in the northwest province of Santa Fe under the protection of her blonde-haired, blue-eyed cousins who themselves had a *mulata* mother. They managed to shield Francisca from racist comments during her childhood. She moved to Buenos Aires at sixteen and attended high school with a lot of Jewish girls. They were the ones that befriended her and invited her over to their houses. The other girls never talked to her, which she attributes to the fact that she was friends with Jews. This led her to tell the story about the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and how her daughter Gisela had passed the building just minutes before it exploded. Francisca emphasized that Jews are very much discriminated against in Argentina. She then told another story about a light-skinned black man who was the target of racist slurs on a bus and reported it to the authorities. Furthermore, in her home province of Santa Fe, there was a scandal over a newspaper ad specifying a patron looking for a white maid. The man who posted it was reported as well. Her summary of all of these accounts was that she lives in a very racist country, even though she herself has not had any major problems with racism.

I was inclined to fully believe Francisca's assessment of racism in Argentina. Maybe the situation was not that bad for Afro-descendants, and the few things we saw in the news were just isolated incidents. This all changed after an incident that occurred after I moved in with her. One day, Francisca came home irate after picking up her four-

year-old granddaughter from school. She ran to the phone and called a good friend to tell her what had happened, emphatically recounting the story. When she got off the phone, she looked for me in another room of the house and repeated the story to me. The female teacher who was releasing the children at the daycare made it a point not to ever greet Francisca and had made her wait until all the other kids had been called before she was allowed to get her granddaughter. Francisca knew she was being discriminated against, so she purposefully put herself at the front of the line and still received the same treatment. Francisca referred to the employee as a racist and said the woman was probably wondering why a “*negra de mierda*”<sup>28</sup> is picking up a little blonde girl.

Contrary to what I believed from our formal interview, Francisca is very conscious of the everyday racist practices and ideas that circulate in Argentina society. She probably faces them more often than she reveals. I do not know with certainty if Francisca saw me as an American from the United States, a fellow black person, or a researcher interested in race relations in Argentina. She might have understood me to be all three in that moment, and she wanted to make sure I and all of those close to her were aware of the racist treatment she was receiving as a black woman in modern-day Argentina. I think Francisca’s life could very easily typify the reality of the few Afro-Argentines that reside in the capital city. They must deemphasize their blackness to gain access to more social capital and an improved standard of living. Nonetheless, every so often, they are reminded of their “true” place in Argentine society.

## Conclusion: Studying Race Where Racism “Does Not Exist”

My own understandings of race are indubitably influenced by my personal history and subject position as a black female raised in the United States. This knowledge impacts my interpretation of how my black research informants in Argentina see race. The displacement that racialization can cause occurs not only geographically through diasporic movements and other types of migrations but also in the realm of local ideology. Racially marked individuals are made to feel that they are not a part of dominant society and cannot be because of differences in phenotype that are interpreted as indicative of cross-cultural incompatibility. The accounts described in this chapter are

windows into the myriad viewpoints held by Africans and Afro-descendants in Buenos Aires. Through these, it is possible to get a general idea of how each ethnic bloc understands the way race is operating in relation to its own concepts of identity in Argentina.

The Afro-Brazilian perspective on race is that racism is a problem that is in Argentina, Brazil, and everywhere else in the world. There is some debate as to which country is worse in terms of racist treatment toward blacks, but there is a general consensus that Brazil is no racial paradise. Most of their jobs are highly dependent on heavy interaction with nonblack Argentine patrons, so they tend to offer few public critiques of racism. Racism is just another part of the everyday experience as blacks and foreigners. It is something they do not like but have to live with. Afro-Brazilians, as a whole, do not see much progress being made toward the recognition of black populations and anti-racist struggles, so they stay out of public racial politics in Argentina. The few that have chosen to be in the public eye are seen as misrepresenting Brazilians by playing to racist stereotypes of black Brazilians as carefree, disorganized, and incapable of discussing serious social issues.

Nigerians and other Africans are very much aware that racism exists in Argentina and recognize Argentines as its perpetrators. They see racism as just another obstacle to their goals of long-term success in the nation. They believe hard work eventually will trump racist attitudes. In the Nigerian imaginary, Afro-Argentines are failing as a bloc because of the lack of male leadership. They have lost a sense of themselves as black people and have even let their strong African genes and cultural values get “washed out” through intermarriage with whites. This is ironic, considering that the overwhelming majority of African males have Euro-Argentine partners and children that are first generation Argentines of African descent.

For Afro-Argentines, racism seems to be the private burden of their insular ethnic bloc. Several confessed to me in confidence that racism is a major problem in Argentina. They usually had several stories of their own racist encounters as well as those of friends and families. Afro-Argentines are upset and ashamed that they continue to be the targets of discriminatory treatment, yet at the same time, they avoid any public participation in protesting racism. It is not that they have given up on claiming black identities or fighting racist attitudes, but rather they consciously have chosen to retreat from doing so in public forums. Afro-Argentines’ sense of racial consciousness is still very strong and demonstrated through musical, dance, culinary, and

other traditions that are passed down through generations. They have decided to make these inaccessible for public viewing and critique. As a people, they have not been defeated, and their deliberate withdrawal allows them the freedom to express themselves in the private domain of their homes and closed-invitation community events. Though it is rare to see them in public actively seeking racial equality, many believe they are the only rightful inheritors of state policies benefiting blacks.

As scholars, through the study of less visible populations, we can better understand the everyday realities of race and racism in a nation. These understandings are essential to gain insight into the histories and social practices that make certain blocs invisible. A concept like blackness can be construed in a variety of ways in the eyes of different black populations, all with their own unique histories and perspectives. These should all be considered because identity is by nature relational, contextual, and constantly being reworked.<sup>29</sup> The handful of scholars who have researched blackness in Argentina tend only to focus their work on a single bloc like Afro-Argentines, Cape Verdeans, or Afro-Brazilians.<sup>30</sup> However, blackness is visible in different ways within multiple ethnic blocs in the same geographic area, though they might all share a convergent African diasporic identity. Additionally, each bloc is contributing to how Argentine society understands blackness. We must do more than just affirm the existence of blacks in areas where they have been rendered invisible. While researching the history of this process is important, what is really lacking is an understanding of the everyday lives of black individuals. It is within these accounts that we find evidence of what race means and how it operates locally. Argentina is an important site for understanding the resurgence of black identities that is occurring throughout Latin America, as it represents an extreme case of the invisibility of Africans and Afro-descendants.

## Notes

1. Faye V. Harrison, "Introduction: An African Diaspora Perspective to Urban Anthropology," *Urban Anthropology* 17, Nos. 2-3 (1988): 90.
2. Harrison, "An African Diaspora Perspective to Urban Anthropology," 117.
3. See, for example, Gary A. Olsen and Elizabeth Hirsh, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995).
4. See Irma McClaurin, "Theorizing A Black Feminist Self in Anthropology," *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory: Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*. I. McClaurin ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

5. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. R. G. Fox ed. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137.
6. Kirin Narayan, "How Native is a Native Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, No. 3 (Sept., 1993): 682.
7. Faye V. Harrison, "Ethnography As Politics," in Faye V. Harrison, *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, 3rd edition (Arlington, VA: Association of Black Anthropologists, American Anthropological Association, 1997), 91.
8. See Kia Lilly Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).
9. *Ibid.*, xxii.
10. France Winddance Twine, "Racial Ideologies and Racial Methodologies," *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies*. F. W. Twine and J. W. Warren (eds.). (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
11. Faye V. Harrison, *Outsider Within: Reworking Anthropology in the Global Age* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 13.
12. Caldwell, *Negras in Brazil*, 2007.
13. Michael Hanchard, "Racism, Eroticism, and the Paradoxes of a U.S. Black Researcher Brazil," *Racing Research, Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies*. F. W. Twine and J. W. Warren eds. pp. 165–185 (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 183.
14. Harrison, "Ethnography As Politics," 1997. See also Tony Whitehead, "Breakdown, Resolution, and Coherence: The Fieldwork Experience of a Big, Brown, Pretty-talking Man in a West Indian Community," *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-cultural Fieldwork*. T. L. Whitehead and M. E. Conaway eds. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 213–239.
15. Harrison, "Ethnography As Politics," 1997.
16. Whitehead and Conaway, *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-cultural Fieldwork*, 1996.
17. His assumption was not that I was a spy of any particular government, but that I wanted to participate in his group's activities so that I could pass the information along to rival groups who would then steal his group's ideas or sabotage their plans.
18. See Peggy Golde, "Introduction". In P. Golde ed., *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970) 1–15, 8.
19. Carlos Páez Vilaró, "La danza, ese invisible pespunte." In D.V. Picotti ed., *El negro en la Argentina: presencia y negación* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editores de América Latina, 2001), 255–272.
20. The education system is free through a bachelor's level degree in Argentina. State universities are the top institutions and extremely competitive. A degree from them would greatly increase employment opportunities. In order to get into state universities, students have to score very high on the entrance exams. Students who are best prepared for these have attended private schools all

their lives in addition to having tutors work with them at home. Thus, what appears to be a “free” education on the surface is, in fact, only accessible to those in higher income brackets.

21. See, for example, Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston, MA: Little, 1967); Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Marilyn M. Thomas-Houston, “*Stony the Road*” to Change: *Black Mississippians and the Culture of Social Relations* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); France Winddance Twine, *Racism in a Racial Democracy: The Maintenance of White Supremacy in Brazil* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
22. Harrison, “An African Diaspora Perspective to Urban Anthropology,” 117.
23. *Ibid.*, 117.
24. McClaurin, “Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology,” 61.
25. Stuart Hall Cultural, “Identity and Diaspora.” In J. E. Braziel and A. Mannur eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 233–246.
26. Charles Hale, *Más que un Indio = More than an Indian: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006).
27. Gloria Marshall, “In a World of Women: Field Work in a Yoruba Community.” In *Women in the Field* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), 165–191.
28. “*Negro de mierda*” is a popular racist insult used against people of all racial groups. It can roughly be translated to “nigger.”
29. Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. De Vos, “Ethnic Identity: A Psychocultural Perspective.” In L. Romanucci-Ross and G. A. De Vos eds., *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995), 349–379; Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).
30. be Alejandro Frigerio, and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, *Argentinos e Brasileiros: Encontros, Imagens e Estereótipos* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002); Néstor R. Ortiz Oderigo and Norberto Pablo Cirio, *Esquema de la Música Afroargentina* (Buenos Aires: EDUNTREF, 2008). Dina V. Picotti, “Introducción”. In Dina V. Picotti ed., *El Negro en la Argentina: Presencia y Negación* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editores de América Latina, 2001), 29–40.

## “You Don’t Look Groomed”: Rethinking Black Barber Shops as Public Spaces

*Quincy T. Mills*

Curious acquaintances often posed some form of the following statement when they learned of my research: “It is interesting that you are researching barber shops and you have such long hair.” In 1999, one year before I began historical research on black barbers and barber shops in the United States, I vowed not to cut my hair and submitted my head to a friend’s dexterous hands. She twisted my hair in sections to form what would become the birth of my locks. Year after year, those locks tangled, some merging to join as one. As each lock grew longer and longer down my back, I plunged deeper and deeper into the archives in search of African Americans who labored as barbers and ran their own shops. In essence, my hair took me farther from the space that my research brought me closer to. But, no, it was not interesting to me that I was researching a business I had not patronized. The historical research seemed much bigger than me, much more significant than my own hair. At no point did I feel less qualified or committed to represent the history of black barbers and the development of their shops in black communities. When I looked to interview barbers in Atlanta, Georgia and Durham, North Carolina, this question of my personal and professional connections to barber shops proved to be more than a curiosity.

In the summer of 2003, I headed South with a tape recorder and a set of interview questions, ready to begin a collaborative production of oral history. My luggage included more than technical equipment and guided notes. I also carried with me a set of theoretical

assumptions of black barber shops: a sense of belonging based on blackness and maleness. Ethnographers, and even reporters of late, have entered African American barber shops to explore the development of masculinity and public discourse in the black public sphere. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out in 1962, “eleven o’clock on Sunday morning...is the most segregated hour in America, and the Sunday school is the most segregated school of the week.”<sup>1</sup> While segregation is the wrong way to describe the social and political space of the black church, eleven o’clock on Saturday morning in the barber shop mirrors its sacred kin. Black men willingly hang out and talk in these shops, which lends an easily identifiable image of what we expect to find when we enter them, and, indeed, when we research them. At no point did I consider myself an outsider as many people had intimated. In traditional shops, women and whites are considered outsiders. The term “outsider” is to be taken loosely because women are welcomed, but the conversations shift. White men would not be turned away, but their presence might alter the conversations. Yet, the postmodern barber shop is decidedly different from its modern roots. Barber-Beauty salons line the streets of a number of American cities. Men and women interact more often in these grooming places. Markers of exclusion are much less visible, but the popular imaginations of barber and beauty shops are homosocial. Yet, barbers in the South thought very little about my blackness or my maleness, or some feel-good image of barber shops as a bastion of black community formation. In fact, they were more concerned that I needed a haircut.

In this chapter, I reflect on my research journey in the southern United States to interview African Americans who owned or worked in a barber shop during the 1960s and 1970s. Overall, I wanted to learn of their life histories: how they came to barbering, their experiences in the profession, and the shape of black politics in their shops. Additionally, I was eager to know how their shops were situated in the black freedom struggle. Did Afros and Naturals generate heated divisions over symbolic and direct resistance, demonstrating a collision between cultural and movement politics? While I was interested in barbers’ oral histories, they were more interested in my then sixteen-inch locks. “It is a recognized fact,” historian Gary Okihiro has noted, “that the setting in which the interview is held, the nature of the questions, and even the appearance of the interviewer may bias responses and restrict the flow of information.”<sup>2</sup> I successfully obtained a couple of interviews, but most of these southern barbers

declined to participate because they fundamentally disagreed with my hair.

This chapter is into the preinterview encounters—the getting-in process, moments of small talk and gaining trust—and the substantive value of being turned away. Scholars have written extensively about the interview, its design, and the transcription process.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the moments of building trust and being turned away offer stark insights about historical subjects. I benefited from robust questioning before the formal interview. In fact, I learned major lessons from the multiple rejections because I saw their worldview better than I might have otherwise seen from my guided—or misguided—questions. Thus, there are no how-to nuggets on the interview process between the lines of this reflection. Rather, it highlights the successes of the pitfalls. Essentializing barber shops as democratic spaces of public discourse depresses real democratic engagement that comes out of conflicting interests. The material conditions of entrepreneurialism inform these spaces as much as the public discourse that emerge from them, accounting for market forces in how we assess blackness. We should expand the boundaries of the interview, which requires that we take full account for the present in memories of the past.

This journey South did not mark my first personal or professional experience in barber shops. My grandfather worked as a barber in Chicago, and needless to say, he was my barber. While I was too young to recall the nuances of group dynamics and the particulars of their conversations, I certainly remember my grandfather's generosity to folks who came inside, the occasional adult who told me my grandfather cut his hair and now cuts his son's hair, and the way my grandfather would sit back in his barber chair and talk with his fellow barber. The sense of community left an indelible mark on me, but as a young boy I was most interested in getting my haircut. My grandfather gave me conservative haircuts—the most radical style he allowed me to incorporate was a diagonal part. While he cut my hair most of my life, I frequented other shops with friends. I had passed these spaces in my daily travels in Chicago and seen men sitting outside these shops, talking and drinking. I had caught scenes of barbers clipping away, men sitting in the waiting chairs, and others standing around talking with passion. These spaces were not foreign to my everyday life. After my grandfather passed away, I tried new and, probably by his account, more radical hairstyles. But I wanted to remain employable, so I stopped short of any hairstyle that would limit my chances of getting a job.

I grew dreadlocks after I left the corporate world to enter graduate school full-time. This transition from working for someone else to working for myself—as student of course the education and degree were my profits—gave me the freedom to decide what was appropriate and pleasing. I came of age after the “Black is Beautiful” and disco eras of black cultural and political life when African Americans wore Afros both to signal black pride and protest when they raised clenched fists to rings of “black power,” and to strut down the Soul Train line with nicely shaped Afros to match their dance moves. My preceding generation exercised control over their hairstyles within the context of the black power movement. Because of their political and cultural radicalism, I did not need a social movement to grow dreadlocks. However, I had to negotiate the structures of discrimination that remain. I grew dreadlocks to connect to a diasporic blackness rooted in autonomy and freedom.

Dreadlocks have multiple meanings in Jamaica and, specifically, within Rastafarian culture, but they share attributes with the Afro. “Aesthetically,” according to Ennis Edmonds, “they [dreadlocks] indicate a rejection of Babylon’s definition of beauty, especially as it relates to European features and hair quality” for more acceptance and pride in one’s natural hair.<sup>4</sup> Babylon refers to the state, or a government that oppresses black people. Spiritually, Rastafarians’ commitment to naturalness is tied to their belief in the power of hair. They believe “the shaking of the locks is thought to unleash spiritual energy, which will eventually bring about the destruction of Babylon. The locks are therefore symbolic of Babylon’s unavoidable doom, and the very sight of the locks is suppose to generate fear in the hearts of Babylonians, hence *dreadlocks*.”<sup>5</sup> I am not Rastafarian, but I shared this symbolism of dreadlocks as an act of defiance against social norms concerning grooming. These social norms, for me, rested with society, such as the corporate world or the state, but not necessarily with the barbering industry. I was not defying barbers by growing dreadlocks. In fact, I believed they were in the best position to understand changing hairstyles and personal autonomy.

My personal connections to barber shops became quite professional during my second year of graduate school. In the summer of 2000, when my locks were a year and a half old, I did ethnographic work in a shop on the Southside of Chicago to assist Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a political science professor, with her research on African Americans’ political thought and attitudes in group settings. Harris-Lacewell suggested I might gather more authentic data as a black man, and

native of the Southside, because her presence would alter the organic discussions that emerge in these spaces. Men in barber shops often censure themselves when women are present as a public and patriarchal gesture toward gentlemanly behavior. In addition, my knowledge of ethnographic research methods contributed to this opportunity to do research by hanging out. I sat inside the shop four to five days per week listening to the conversations and observing the interactions among the collective body of people. When the owner granted me access to the shop, neither he nor the other barbers raised questions about my locks. One barber, under thirty-five years old, made the occasional joke that he would welcome the opportunity to cut off my locks.<sup>6</sup> I had also spent time in a barber shop on the Westside of Chicago facilitating weekly conversations on various topics as a function of the Public Square's Café Society.<sup>7</sup> The barbers here were also under forty years old, and they said very little about my hair.

Based on my experiences in Chicago, I understood barber shops as public spaces in the black public sphere. "Black public spaces are unique," Harris-Lacewell argues, "because African Americans come together in these arenas because of their blackness in a way that can, but does not necessarily, happen in other counterpublic arenas...Barbershops are the archetype of the black public space, consisting of a relatively permanent physical space, but with constantly changing membership."<sup>8</sup> Black men patronize black-owned barber shops because they trust a black barber will be familiar with their hair type and preferred styles. While barbers engage in cultural production in their work, black men sit around the shop talking, reading, or playing games. Psychologists William Grier and Price Cobb described barber shops in 1968 as "the black man's way station, point of contact, universal home."<sup>9</sup> It is a place where authority shifts based on the conversation; where everyone gets challenged to authenticate their sources or tall tales; where community is developed around the shop's permanency and the barber's skill and trustworthiness. In the typical shop, men of various class standings gather together in what seems to be a democratic space, albeit a homosocial one. I was confident in my fluency in this culture, and believed my blackness and manliness—two key organizing principles of many black barber shops—would grant me insider status. As a northerner and a PhD student, and one who went without a haircut for four years by the time of that summer 2003 research trip, I expected to be tried. However, if barber shops were a "black man's universal home," I expected my trial to be about ideas—how much I knew about history or barbering, or even if

I could hold my own in playing the dozens—and less about my hair. After all, a central feature of these spaces is that men can find community there even if they do not get a haircut.

I had prepared myself for the “getting in” process, which would entail sitting in the shop, hanging out, and contributing to the conversations. Barber shops are very local places anchored in the communities in which they do business. Barbers, especially those who have been rooted in a particular shop, neighborhood, or city for multiple decades, have seen the changes in people and places. Because the barber-customer relationship thrives on intimacy and trust, they have likely cut the hair of multiple generations of clients. Since barbers and their shops are rooted in local communities, I first visited and spoke with people at other institutions similarly rooted in the community, such as the Auburn Avenue Research Center in Atlanta. They helped me establish connections and pointed me to barbers who had been cutting hair in the city for decades. Beyond these connections, I would find my source base, my subjects, by walking the streets and glancing through the window at each shop I passed. I had expected most of my interviews to take place in their shops. While this was sure to be unsettling for me without control over the noise, I relished the idea of conducting a public oral history. Perhaps the barber might share stories his fellow barbers or customers had not heard. Perhaps our conversation might spark a larger conversation within the shop about any number of issues. Therefore, the conceptual and public advantages far outweighed the technical disadvantages. I certainly had prepared myself for salivating barbers, both joking and serious, eager to clip off my long locks.

I began my travels in Atlanta then traveled east to Durham in search of black barbers. As I introduced myself, and my project, these barbers typically asked, “Who sent you and who are your people?” They wanted to know what connections I had to the city and to the South. In her biography of Ella Baker, Barbara Ransby recounts historian Paula Giddings’s attempt to interview Baker in the 1980s. Ransby writes, “Instead of responding to Giddings’ questions about the past, Baker kept asking her a single question: ‘Now, who are your people?’” While this question partly reflected Baker’s long bout with Alzheimer’s, it also reflected her attempt to “locate an individual as a part of a family, a community, a region, a culture, and a historical period.”<sup>10</sup> Those connections and rootedness signaled how quickly trust could be attained. As one contact told me, “Be sure to tell him I sent you, or else he won’t want to deal with you.”

My people did not hail from Mississippi, the proverbial migratory home from which many black Chicagoans caught the Illinois Central Railroad between 1915 and 1960. Rather, my maternal grandmother and grandfather migrated from Macon, Georgia, and Centralia, Illinois (west of St. Louis), respectively, and my paternal grandparents migrated from Kinston, North Carolina. My paternal grandparents took me and my brothers on the annual summer vacation "back home," which gave me a small claim to the South. African Americans who had participated in the southern diaspora, as historian James Gregory calls it, held on to their connections with their southern roots by sending their children and grandchildren down South to visit those who stayed.<sup>11</sup> Emmett Till is a well-known, yet tragic reminder of this practice. The fact of sending children South illustrated black northerners' connections to the black South. While Till only knew of the South through family connections, these are critical in roots-making and historical memory. In fact, his uncle had shared stories about Mississippi with him, fueling his interests to visit. These stories were undoubtedly about life behind the veil, within the black community sans the humiliating and violent experiences of living with Jim Crow. Till's visit to his people in Mississippi, or a return to his familial home, was deadly. Historical changes and transformations spared me Jim Crow's reach when I traveled from Chicago to Atlanta and Durham. Because we navigate the past and future in the present, these barbers, understandably, needed to gauge a first level of trust in the present before opening a window into their past.

Would southern barbers "not want to deal" with me because they knew not from whence I came, or because their engagements with black culture was mediated by region, generation, and economy? Since the 1980s, African Americans have increasingly turned South in search of education, jobs, affordable home ownership, and retirement, and have reshaped the cultural landscape of southern cities. In this return migration, some have literally returned to home towns they left decades ago. African Americans, as a collective, have returned to the South as a reversal of the large-scale black migratory movement that occupied much of the twentieth century.

Milton Sernett points out that "during the eighties the percentage of all African Americans who lived in the South went from 52 percent to 56 percent, the first increase in the twentieth century."<sup>12</sup> According to Carol Stack, "by 1990 the South had gained more than half a million black Americans who were leaving the North—or more precisely, the South had *regained* from the cities of the North the half-million black

citizens it had lost to northward migration during the 1960s.”<sup>13</sup> In 1998, *Jet* magazine ran an article in the lifestyles section titled “Why Blacks are Returning to the South.” The author accounted for the black population boom in southern cities between 1990 and 1996, and placed Atlanta at the head of the pack.<sup>14</sup> Atlanta has become the southern metropolis of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. As a modern New South city, Atlanta looks very different from Martin Luther King Jr.’s Atlanta. Since 1974, the city has had consecutive black mayors. Shirley Franklin, who served from 2002 to 2010, was the first woman elected to the city’s highest office. The post-1990s migration to the South is not a direct return, but rather a first point of destination for many young northern-born African Americans drawn to the visibility of black leadership and the emergence of black economic, educational, and cultural institutions. They were not “called home,” as Stack talks about return migrants. Some could claim the South through family connections, others through racial connections.<sup>15</sup> Blacks helped build the South as slaves, build the New South in the post-Reconstruction period, and now blacks are helping to rebuild the South from positions of leadership. In a southern metropolis, it is unlikely the barbers I spoke with had not seen black men with long locks passing by their shops. Did these barbers think the emergence of locks in the South was attributed to the northern migration to the South? Or was it simply that black men with locks in the South had not asked them to talk about their history in the barbering profession?

Whatever my affinities about blackness and barber shop culture, and inquiries about history, these barbers raised a series of questions that were at once about my hair and the underlying functions of their business. The first barber I approached in Atlanta was standing outside his shop on Auburn Avenue, the city’s historic black business district. After formal introductions, he asked me several questions about myself. We talked at length about family, clothing, rap music, and his deep concern about youth culture and its lack of respectability. He argued I could never understand the Civil Rights Movement as a young historian because I had not gone through it. While I was not as young as he thought, I was certainly among the post-civil rights and black power generation. He signaled the importance of centralizing the voices of historical actors in any representation of the past. He staked claims to authority in our brief conversation. What role did I, as an oral historian, have in retelling his life and experiences? Could I truly understand the history I wanted him to speak, and faithfully pass it on with great care if I had no attachment?

These questions on history and culture were primers for his more direct questions about my hair. "Do you wear your hair like that because of your religion?" he inquired. Put another way, was I a Rastafarian? It was apparent that he had asked the question to keep from offending me. If I had not cut my hair because of my religion, that was one thing; but if not, then I was marked along with the masses of less respectable youth around the country. If I was attached to my hair, in this barber's world, I was detached from the barber shop, which would prevent me from truly understanding the history of his profession. He implicated the Jamaican diaspora of Rastafarians in how he made sense of my long locks in relation to his profession and my research.

Other barbers more directly disapproved of my hair to foreground the tenets of their profession. "I'm in the grooming business," one barber offered his professional opinion, "and you don't look groomed." Another barber succinctly questioned, "What does it mean that you're here to talk to me about barbering, but you haven't cut your hair in I don't know how long?" Yet another barber stated, "If we were depending on people like you, we would be out of business." From *my* subject position, this barber, and others throughout this research trip, was distracted by my hair. But from *his* subject position, my hair posed a material threat to his livelihood. This particular question though gave me an opening to reframe our discussion around the past. "Well, you saw this in the 1960s and 1970s," I responded, "when Afros and Naturals emerged on the scene." I asked him, and other barbers I later interviewed, about this highly politicized era of hairstyles as cultural markers of the social construction of blackness.<sup>16</sup> So, this fortuitous exchange on the past at least pointed me to an interview, even if it was an informal one. This also gave me a moment to establish authority of my own. The barber was quick to point out "they were still coming in for shape-ups or some other service." While I do not know the state of his shop in the 1960s, interviews with several southern and northern barbers reveal quite a different story. Many barbers frankly remembered Afros and Naturals nearly put them out of business. Barbers adapted to Afros with such products as the blowout, but they were keenly aware of the declining patronage across the board. The verifiable or reliable source of this information on the effects of Afros on black barber shops—the memory or past happening—should not overshadow the process of recall—the present activity of remembering.

These moments of gaining trust turned out to be a defining moment of historical memory and present remembering. Some people confront

unsettling dispositions with the present by developing “selective amnesia and artificial distance” from the past.<sup>17</sup> My rejections illuminate the significance of oral history as a theory of how people remember. By definition, memory starts from the present; therefore one’s present conditions inform how they remember past situations. However, this is far from a linear process from present to past. The act of remembering is a present activity, which forms a memory, or a historical narrative, yet that memory circles back from the past to mark the present. For example, revisionist histories are created in present political, social, and economic conditions to delineate a historical narrative to explain those present conditions. These barbers staked claims in this research about their profession, race, and respectability. In essence, my hair served as a marker for how they untangled the present to say something about history and blackness.

I stood as an embodiment to barbers’ challenges in the profession over time, which was a history I wanted them to share with me. Their acts of remembering drew on region, generation, and the racial politics of entrepreneurship to offer their own rendering of blackness as a historical project in grooming black men. First, region might have played a role in how southern barbers received me. When I walked the streets of Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn to interview barbers on a subsequent research trip, I received a more open reception. While a few northern barbers questioned my hair, they stopped short of allowing it to determine if they would grant me an interview. Could it be that on average, northern barbers had seen and become accustomed to locks in ways that southern barbers had not? Durham and Atlanta are certainly different southern cities, but locks are not a southern aberration. Yet, this might point to larger regional differences in African American culture, particularly in an era when more African Americans are “returning” South. Is there such a region as “DownNorth”? In what ways do longtime southern black residents believe northern black migrants are bringing a “northern” culture to the South? Scholars of the major twentieth-century migrations raised these questions of the southern exodus.<sup>18</sup> Barbers imagined my hair, as an embodiment to a changing southern culture, in a regional lens, but a national lens underscored those imaginings.

Second, these encounters can also be read as generational. As older black men, and barbers at that, they saw my “uncut” hair tied up with youth culture and dress. One barber seemed quite puzzled at how I would get a job. It should come as no surprise that older barbers tend to be more socially conservative than their younger counterparts.

This civil rights generation knows first-hand the challenges of racial barriers. They wore suits to protest Jim Crow to show the world, via television cameras, an image of respectable citizens fighting for justice. They have also lived to witness signal changes in job opportunities for African Americans. Barbers charged themselves with making men look good for a variety of reasons such as the market and leisure. They had gone through their own hair revolutions, and they had seen hairstyles change over time. Yet, these two explanations fail to work alone.

These encounters had everything to do with how they saw their lives and labor as barbers. Self-sufficiency has been a key component of the meanings of freedom since slavery.<sup>19</sup> Barber shops have historically been one of the most accessible paths to business ownership and economic independence. These men took their roles as entrepreneurs very seriously. The popular idea that the barber shop is the place where men of all walks of life can talk freely may be true and endearing. Barbers, however, kept their eyes on the bottom line. Both my research agenda and my physical presence failed to speak to the lived experiences of southern barbers. I could help the former, but not the latter. There was a limit to how much I could contribute to the economy of multiple shops. I could get a shave from only one barber in a three-week research trip. By casting a national net, I benefited from a wide spectrum of voices and regionalisms. But, one disadvantage was the financial limitations placed on the length of a research trip. In short, it takes time to establish trust. These barbers saw no reason to trust me, especially when my hair indicated, to them, that I cared little about the sustainability of their profession.

My southern research journey had gone terribly wrong but it allowed me to recalibrate my questions to better rethink the inter-workings of these businesses. I had never imagined I would be an outsider in a black barber shop. I was male and black; was that not enough? In *Black Workers Remember*, Michael Honey describes his initial concern as a white northern graduate student going to Memphis, Tennessee to conduct interviews with black Firestone workers. "They sometimes commented on my 'whiteness' or my outsider status as a northern academic," he recalled, "and they puzzled out how much I understood about racism." He believed his "past history in Memphis as a civil liberties and civil rights organizer boded well for collaboration."<sup>20</sup> I took race and gender to be advantages so much that I gave it little thought, and I certainly failed to consider my hair as a disadvantage in gaining trust. My professional and personal

experiences inside these spaces, coupled with a deep popular rendering of its culture, shaped my essentialist framework. I was critical of the egalitarian nod most academics and the general public ceded over to barber shops, but I had not located the structural functions of engagement. Without a sense of the relations of power, a false notion of democracy sits at the center of barber shop culture. In other words, black barber shops get inscribed as public spaces where men feel comfortable to engage each other on various issues.

In the 2002 movie *Barbershop*, Cedric the Entertainer's character passionately declared the barber shop was the "black man's country club." Country clubs are far from egalitarian. Rather, they are based on privacy and selectivity. The owner plays a critical role as gatekeeper in adjusting the clarity of the window into the shop. I brought a set of research questions to the field, but before I had much of a chance to vet them, I was fortunate to get a much more "authentic" set of questions that came from the very folks I wanted to write about. I had formulated a research agenda around scholarly conversations that mattered very little to the folks in the shop. In fact, after conducting several interviews in the North, and later in the South, it became apparent that this dichotomy between movement and cultural politics did not exist. By rendering visible the business of the barber shop, it is apparent blackness offers no easy membership to the "black man's country club."

These rejected interviews handed me a new way to understand how black barber shops were situated in the black public sphere, which was new for scholars and the larger public, but not new for barbers. After the wounds of rejection had healed, I realized that I had had my interview with these men. They had given me information that helped me better understand how they saw themselves vis-à-vis how they saw me, and indeed how they saw their past. My encounters with these barbers pushed me to reframe my understandings of the space. That barbers questioned me as I questioned them is common to any fieldwork experience, but, in my case, it demonstrated the work of barbers and their shops in ways that an actual interview may not have revealed.

This research experience informed my framework about the interplay of the shops as both businesses and public spaces. My outsider status—a northerner, un-groomed, young black male, and potentially a West Indian—illuminated how these barbers perceived their function in the black public sphere: to groom black men. The social organization of barbers' labor to groom men included the value they placed on

making men look good, presentable, and respectable. Grooming black men was a way of making a respectable black masculinity. For the set of barbers I was looking to interview, a neatly groomed face and head could be the difference in getting a job or getting a date, two measurements of masculinity. But, respectable grooming also mattered for how white Americans racialized black individuals as representatives of an entire group. Therefore, barbers took great pride in their roles to help construct identities. To be sure, they shared this role of grooming race with black beauticians.<sup>21</sup> Together, they produced style for their customers' professional, political, and pleasure purposes.

Instead of thinking of barber shops as public spaces, which centralizes the customers and public discourse, it is more illuminating to think of them specifically as commercial public spaces. Placing barber shops within the black public sphere misses the market forces within which these shops operate. A black commercial public sphere unearths the private and public, individual and collective interests that organize these spaces. Barber shops include four groups of people who make up its social organization: the shop owner, the employed barbers, patrons in the barber's chair getting groomed, and the waiting public, or people waiting to move into the barber's chair or just hanging out. Owners decide if they will allow men to hang around without getting a haircut, but the waiting public is central to the shop's brand. Black newspapers, the numbers runner of the interwar period and the petty entrepreneur are there because they know a group of people will be idle. Owners and employed barbers engage each other over "independent-labor" issues such as booth rent, percentages, professionalism, and opening and closing times. Barber and patron form intimate commercial relationships based on trust. Patrons do not switch barbers often, unless they travel extensively or move to a new city. Any entrepreneur would relish the formation of community surrounding their business, yet businesses must make money to stay open. Barbers balance their profit motives with the public space of their shops.

These encounters not only opened a more critical way of thinking about barbers and their shops, they also helped me rethink my encounters with barbers who could not actually question me, barbers in the nineteenth century who exclusively groomed white men. Black barbers in the nineteenth century faced a dilemma. White men refused to be shaved alongside black customers out of fear that blacks would be perceived as equal. Black barbers with commercial shops chose to exclusively groom white men. The black community labeled

them “color-line” barbers for succumbing to the market demands of the white elite. When black communities pressed color-line barbers to explain their policies, they often cited differences in hair type, suggesting white men’s straight hair was easier to cut. As entrepreneurs, they negotiated slavery and Jim Crow to build businesses in a personal service industry defined by racial deference. Rather than the “black man’s country club,” the nineteenth-century black barber shop was more like the white man’s country club. My declined southern interviews opened space to rethink nineteenth-century color-line barbers beyond black conservative politics. Their decisions to exclude black customers in order to secure a niche in white patrons were decidedly business decisions in a racialized market economy. To understand their politics I had to examine their activities after their shops closed.<sup>22</sup> I could not interview them, but this limitation did not negate their subjectivity and contributions to my work.

Oral historians generally champion a shared authority or collaborative work in producing oral histories. Michael Frisch defined shared authority as a collaborative narrative inherent in oral history, while sharing authority describes an “approach to doing oral history.”<sup>23</sup> Interviewers’ questions and interviewees’ responses are equally important to the resulting narrative. They negotiate the final narrative, as produced in transcripts and public forums, to shape meaning, or the pull between intent and interpretation. My subjects had power over if, what, and how they shared their stories, and as the interviewer I had authority in the kinds of questions I asked that would tap certain kinds of memories. I also had authority to shape the narrative in my own retelling. Michael Honey describes his collection of narratives with black workers in Memphis as “a joint creation of the workers, the interviewer, the transcribers, and the historian.”<sup>24</sup> Since I did not actually conduct interviews with these barbers, I was not obligated to share any authority. I had not once considered allowing one of these barbers to cut my hair; that seemed to me a level of authority I was unwilling to cede. Yet, the barbers who declined to be interviewed had as much to say, and were as much participants, as the barbers who actually shared their life histories. Therefore, I shared authority both with those who refused to talk and those who filled hours of recorded time.

While I wanted to tell a narrative about barbers and barber shops, I had to first divest myself of the popular and essentialist egalitarian paradigm. By thinking about the dual identities of barber shops as business and public spaces, we can begin to think more about

barbers' roles in determining the level of democratic engagement in the shop. By bringing the barber back into discussions about the functions of barber shops, we gain a clearer vision of how race and the market economy have historically informed the nature of democratic engagement and the contested meanings of freedom within black communities.

This research experience in the South proved particular to this region and my hair, with a few exceptions. After my southern pitfalls, I interviewed a number barbers within the same demographic in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and New York. For the sake of research, I had not changed my approach. In fact, I believed my approach was generally fine; I stopped short of cutting my hair in service to the research project. A majority of these northern barbers, all southern-born, agreed to an interview. And, only one raised a question about my hair. A barber in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York wondered how I would navigate the job market with long "braids" on my head. He seemed skeptical of my explanation that as an academic I had a little more freedom in how I wore my hair than if I worked in the corporate world. In addition, he expressed concern that long "braids" were feminine; men should not wear their hair that long. For him, barbering was a way of making black manly identities. Despite his criticisms, he eventually consented to an interview.

Another New York barber was also skeptical, but it had less to do with my hair and more to do with the commodification of historical narratives. This Queens barber was no novice to interviews because many journalists over the years had talked with him about his most famous customer, Louis Armstrong. Yet, the barber believed he had been exploited in the past for his recollections on his associations with an American icon. Their intimate relationship would have been unrecorded, and might provide a glimpse of Armstrong's private life. While I was more interested in the barber than with Armstrong, the barber wanted to know how I would "use" his narratives, or how I might turn them into a commodity. Interviewers operate in a community where the missteps of one potentially affect others. On the whole, northern barbers showed less concern about my hair than about my research project.

Blackness, maleness, and belonging in black barber shops were much more complicated than I had anticipated. The popular notion of these businesses as a public spaces where a black man can get a hearing informs romantic sensibilities of a static democratic community. The challenge of community here gets marked as manly contest in

public discourse. So the romance goes, free to express themselves without white surveillance, black men work out their manhood among other men as they tell tales, challenge and get challenged on points of information and worldliness, and claim authority on history and black identity. Economically and socially, blackness brings them to these shops every Saturday. Blackness and maleness binds these men together, creating a shared sense of belonging. Yet, the core of the space is based on barbers' working lives to groom that sense of identity one head and face at a time. Nonetheless, barbers had to cut enough hair to remain spaces of community gathering. Barbers' work of grooming men operated as both an ideological *and* an economic function of black barber shops.

In 2009, I cut my hair because this too represented a fine exercise of my freedom. I would like to say that barbers wore me down, but this decision had nothing to do with my research. I had already gathered rich oral histories from such collections as the *Behind the Veil Project*, but I was still interested in talking with southern barbers. I wondered if a research trip, with shorter hair, would offer different results. I returned South, this time to Birmingham, Alabama, to a different reception. No talk of my hair. No concerns about my motivations in retelling their histories as groomers. My prior experience with dreadlocks, however, allowed me to gain a more precise understanding of the meanings of their work. "By being able to direct questions at the interviewee's conceptions of history and historical change," Okihiro explains, "the oral historian, unlike the archival historian, is able to arrive at a deeper understanding of the people and their history."<sup>25</sup> The economy of the barber shop, and particularly the working lives of barbers, reminds us that community and belonging are dynamic processes. I cut the locks myself, but a barber trimmed and shaped what remained. I had effectively re-entered the barbering economy as a consumer.

## Notes

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## The “Dark Sheep” of the Atlantic World: Following the Transnational Trail of Blacks to Canada

*Dann J. Broyld*

I had traveled to Canada countless times throughout my life before the small Canadian town of St. Catharines became the focus of my dissertation research in 2009. Visiting Canada in pursuit of historical data cast the country in a new light for me as I shuttled over the course of many months between St. Catharines, Ontario, and my hometown of Rochester, New York. St. Catharines is a modest Niagara Peninsula town located between the larger metropolitan areas of Buffalo and Toronto. It is 12 miles (19 kilometers) inland from the U.S. international border and, significant for my research, during the 1850s it was the site of a nearly self-reliant transnational black community. During this turbulent decade that preceded the American Civil War, this community's residents negotiated space for recourse and self-assertion within the American-Canadian crossroads. Its vibrancy was fed by continuous cross-fertilization from both sides of the border.

In St. Catharines, immigration, movement, and interaction with black counterparts across the border were commonplace and defined both as quintessential borderland communities, continuously changing and influencing each other and the communities around them. Continuous adaptation and transformation in this region remains evident and became a feature of my research. There are only a few descendants of the nineteenth-century black community of St. Catharines, so my efforts to reconstruct their histories were shaped by relationships that I formed within the small black community and

the white residents of St. Catharines. This experience certainly influenced my perceptions of the role of the present in shaping the past and the significance of forming relationships that transcend race, gender, and class in framing research methods for social history fieldwork.

My project compared the black communities in St. Catharines and Rochester. Like St. Catharines, Rochester is positioned in the borderlands and during the decade prior to the American Civil War, it was fertile ground for social and political interaction between blacks from Canada and the United States. As mentioned above, these two groups paid little heed to the international boundary between them, and in many respects constituted a common community. The history of exchange between black Rochester and black St. Catharines is rooted in their place as key stops along the latter stages of the Niagara "Underground Railroad" trail. Shared organizational networks, annual celebrations, as well as familial and personal ties strengthened by regular border crossings forged Niagara frontier blacks to negotiate two political realms, using either side to achieve social mobility and greater freedoms.

The history of blacks in Canada remains on the margins of the study of nineteenth-century histories of blacks in North America. Canadians of African descent have been the "dark sheep" of the Atlantic world. While significant attention has been given to the United States, the Caribbean, and South America with regard to the black experience, Canada has remained largely in the background. This is primarily due to the relatively small number of people of African descent in Canada, which stretches back to the decades of slavery within the country.

Black bondage in the former French and British colony can be traced to the seventeenth century. All the provinces in Canada, large and small, held blacks in slavery, including the tiny Prince Edward Island. Yet, Canada's climate and far northern geographical position hampered the development of any large-scale plantation system. Therefore, forced labor among blacks was largely confined to work as domestics for white elites. By 1820, the practice of slavery had nearly dissolved. When the British government finally abolished slavery with the Imperial Act of 1834, some 50 of the approximately 800,000 enslaved persons freed throughout the empire were found in Canada. This legacy of limited slavery and its compounding factors, including fugitives returning to the American South after the outbreak of the Civil War, years of Canadian restrictive laws on black immigration, and the nation's relatively cold climate all contributed to the Canada's black population not exceeding more than three

percent of the total population. However, historical significance in the black Atlantic world should not depend solely on numbers. Blacks in Canada, as well as migrants in a distant land, produce new generations while maintaining ties with Africa.

My research on borderland black communities of the 1850s in North America prompted me to reconsider my own transnational identity, formed not through travel but by having been born and raised near an international border. I was born in Rochester, New York, some 80 miles from Canada, and regularly crossed the border as a child. My American, southern-reared parents enjoyed Canada because the favorable foreign exchange rate, they emphasized, made things "cheaper" in Canada than in the United States. As a result, we crossed the border to shop for school clothes, for vacations, and to entertain family visitors at Niagara Falls. This relationship of transnational travel is shared by millions of Canadians and Americans.

In fact, the American-Canadian border, which until 2001 was the longest undefended border in the world, remained porous because of the shared interests and similarities between the people of the two nations. The border stretches some 5,525 miles<sup>1</sup> and spans from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Despite the claims of only slight dissimilarities, from an early age, I was interested in the basic differences between the nations. Hockey, for example, was the preferred pastime of Canadians, not baseball; throughout large sections of the country French was the predominate language, and there were Maple Leaf flags, instead of Stars and Stripes on flag posts. Over time, I developed a more sophisticated outlook of the cross-national lifestyle to which I was exposed.

Back home in Rochester, as I grew older I developed an appreciation for the city's transnational character. It was a relatively quick journey to Canada via the New York State Thruway, and when we reached the border we did not need to show passports to enter; only a valid driver's license or birth certificate was enough. The ease of passage facilitated a fluid frontier of movement and interaction. Like my family, other black working-class and white people from my hometown took advantage of their proximity to Canada for bargain shopping and other excursions. Moreover, through history we were taught to feel a sense of connection to Canada. I was told stories of the Canadian-bound "Underground Railroad" trail that ran through Rochester in the antebellum period. Rochester was among the last stops on the United States side.

As an adult I learned of deep, more recent connections between blacks on opposite sides of the border. Toronto's annual Caribana Festival and the Montreal International Jazz Festival were chief summer dates on the calendar for Rochester area blacks, and Caribana, a carryover from August First<sup>2</sup> commemorations, which praised the British government for ending slavery throughout the empire in 1834, is an attraction for diasporans throughout the United States and the Caribbean. One of the largest festivals of its kind held outside the Caribbean, the vivid Toronto celebration features a massive street parade with bands, banners, flags, and costumes as well as numerous cultural events. Additionally, for decades in bustling downtown Montreal, a showcase of the New Orleans-born art form of Jazz takes place. This festival, which lasts more than a week, features a host of world-class artists from around the world. For Rochester's black community, these events in Montreal and Toronto have long been a draw.

For me, the principal indicator of Rochester's borderland position was the frequent sight of Ontario license plates throughout the city and the circulation of Canadian coinage. The foreign tags on vehicles were a continual reminder of the transnational junction I inhabited. The plate design artfully contrasted with those of the Empire State (New York). Even Quebec's provincial tags sporadically turned up. All the more interesting in Rochester, United States and Canadian coins were used interchangeably to purchase goods and services. No question of the exchange rate was ever asked. When my family took yearly vacations to the American South, our "odd coins" from Canada with Queen Elizabeth II engraved on them were foreign and useless, but for us they had value. In addition, my father, an amateur coin collector, had the Canadian \$1 Loonies and \$2 Toonies<sup>3</sup> mixed-in with his early twentieth-century pennies and \$1 Susan B. Anthony coins; they were leftover change from one of the many ventures to "Our Northern Neighbors" or found integrated within the local currency. These informal observations were unconsciously preparing me for a deeper relationship with Canada; they gave way to research far more structured and formal.

While I conducted my dissertation research in Canada during the rapidly evolving political climate of the early post-9/11 years, I witnessed key changes in the relationship between Canada and the United States that altered the culture of the borderlands between them. Central to these changes was the checkpoint at the border. Unlike during my childhood, it had become necessary to check the foreign

exchange rate before crossing the border, because the Canadian currency could be worth more than the U.S. dollar. On one occasion, my failure to check the exchange rate before departing for Montreal resulted in me quickly going over budget. Additionally, the border control now required all who crossed the border, including United States and Canadian citizens to show their passport. A passport was no longer a superfluous luxury item. The national authorities do not stamp the booklet and acquiring one is often too costly for those of limited economic means. In the past, Canada provided a way to save money on clothing and other costly items. Yet after September 11, 2001, for many the border became an economic barrier.

The border, only loosely guarded throughout the history of the two countries, became tightly controlled. The guards asked probing questions in an attempt to stop the smuggling of drugs and firearms, and entry of illegal immigrants, and they did so with an overt no-nonsense approach. On one occasion, a guard asked me to pull over to the American customs center where my entire automobile was searched and left in disarray. Such behavior at the border crossing was markedly different from the friendly, casual demeanor of the guards who had waved my family through with friendly banter throughout my life. The days of seamless border crossings were over. The American-Canadian lines had become a more serious national divide, aggressively protected from potential harm. I knew that the new border prerequisites would hamper the international travel flow in both directions, especially for blacks.

Researching on Canadian soil yielded the resources to backup my claims of the cultural and political significance of transient blacks in the Niagara frontier. From museum records to personal collections, the transnational experience only became clearer. The archives at Brock and York Universities<sup>4</sup> yielded conventional resources, but I found the real treasures at the unassuming public libraries, home to the unused and underutilized materials. I located reference books with marriage, naturalization, and obituary records. Within the hodgepodge of files were miscellaneous findings that helped to fully contextualize my work.

I made one principal contact before I arrived in Canada at a talk entitled "Black Canadian Loyalists and Their Flight to Freedom" held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. in January 2009. Dennis, who had served for three years (1993–96) as president of the Historical Society of St. Catharines, personified American-Canadian transnationalism. To me he seemed an unlikely source for black

history in St. Catharines. On both sides of his family, Dennis had historical connections to Canada: a set of great-grandparents immigrated to North America from Ireland around 1854, while the others were from rural Ontario and immigrated to Detroit, Michigan in 1892. His roots in Detroit, which is just across the Detroit River from Windsor, Ontario, enabled him to maintain a strong understanding of Canadian affairs. He frequently visited family members in St. Thomas<sup>5</sup> and had relatives who owned summer cottages in Kingsville, Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Also, in Detroit he had access to television station CKLW, Channel 9, which aired Canada's evening news and provided him with insight into life in Canada.

When I met Dennis, he worked full-time for the federal government in Washington, D.C., but maintained a home back in St. Catharines. On a 1981 trip to investigate his Canadian roots, he met a local history librarian at the St. Catharines library, whom he later married. From that point, his life was again split between the two neighboring countries. He moved to St. Catharines for a time, before ultimately returning to the United States for work. An excellent researcher, Dennis spent years studying blacks in the Niagara Peninsula town and writing articles on a score of local topics. From D.C., he even maintained a weekly column in the *St. Catharines Standard*, the region's leading daily newspaper. During the course of my research, I was fortunate to develop a friendship with him. We once coordinated a time to research in St. Catharines together, which became my most productive trip. He and his wife welcomed me into their home for wonderful, enlightening conversation on Canada and St. Catharines in particular. They invited me to stay at their home to avoid hotel expenses. Temporarily residing with them also enabled me to obtain key contacts with other locals. Through Dennis, my first living connections to the nineteenth-century black community of St. Catharines was a group of white men.

Dennis introduced me to a group of older gentlemen, who gathered on Saturday mornings in the central public library of St. Catharines to discuss history and politics. These wise men, ranging from university professors to self-taught scholars, had a wealth of knowledge that they bestowed upon me. Like Dennis, they understood fine details about St. Catharines that only a seasoned veteran or insider would know. They filled me in on family genealogies, immigration patterns, the evolution of the city's limits, and told me ways in which to maximize my time at area archives. The history that this collection of intellectuals shared with me in conversation, they could backup with

sound documentation. The general conversation we began with when I first met them materialized into a mountain of historical materials that took days to work through and several trips to the copy machine to conquer.

Through these men and the wonderful history of St. Catharines that they exposed me to I became aware of the historical significance of church for the black community of St. Catharines during the nineteenth century. At the heart of the Christian community for blacks in St. Catharines was Salem Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church (BME). I was fortunate to meet with members and officers of the church and obtain a number of brochures on the church's history and copies of a few documents that could only be found on site. The most valuable resource I gathered from the church was the ability to speak with direct descendants of people I was researching in the St. Catharines of the 1850s. I acquired contact information to reach others who were not present. For instance, I talked with a relative of esteemed barber, Thomas P. Casey. He was born in the United States, but became a shopkeeper in St. Catharines and employed other blacks. He was well known for his elaborate advertisements in the local newspapers that boasted of his skills.<sup>7</sup> He married Anne Eliza, a white woman, at the most prestigious church in the entire city St. George's and lived comfortably in the "Colored Village."<sup>8</sup> When another woman used "abusive language" toward his wife, Casey filed a police report citing slander.<sup>9</sup> Prior to beginning my fieldwork, I did not anticipate having the opportunity to meet people with direct heritage links to the individuals I was actively researching in the mid-nineteenth century. It was enlightening to engage such people in their family histories in order to gain a better understanding of black subjects of the past.

While in St. Catharines, I also spent time exploring the intricate layout of the town. One of the places I was most interested in seeing was the Ontario lakeshore neighborhood of Port Dalhousie. It was a section of town that in 1858 was listed as a "local improvement" that no "colored people" lived there.<sup>10</sup> Whites preferred that blacks live and function outside of the vicinity of their homes. Yet in subsequent years, it was the site of vibrant August First Emancipation Day celebrations, which attracted blacks from as far away as Rochester. Port Dalhousie embodied the clash between the discrimination, tolerance, and acceptance in St. Catharines that I was eager to explore.

My interactions during my fieldwork and my sense of myself in relation to those with whom I interacted were influenced by the social

and political status of blacks in Canada. I conducted most of my research in St. Catharines and I found additional documentation for my study in Niagara Falls and Toronto. I saw a diversity of people from all over the world and many blacks at the popularly visited falls and in Toronto, Canada's largest city. Toronto has a foreign-born population of some 49 percent; of those non-natives to the country, the majority is from "visible minority" groups.<sup>11</sup> This term, which is uniquely Canadian, refers to nonwhites and includes an umbrella of people from Arabs, blacks, and Latin Americans to Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders. The term was intended to be ahistorical, apolitical, and void of class as well as racial suggestions. Still many have been critical of this label, deeming it derogatory toward those considered "undesirable elements." Nonetheless, Canada is quite accustomed to outsiders like me.

St. Catharines, by contrast, did not have the same mixture of people as the large Canadian urban centers, yet the inhabitants were by and large equally progressive. Although at times I was the only black face in a sea of uneasy whites, I learned that the black presence in Canada is chiefly an urban phenomenon. Metropolitan areas, such as Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Ottawa-Hull, and Vancouver, have the country's largest concentration of black residents.<sup>12</sup>

In St. Catharines, the black population was roughly 2,600 people out of a total population of over 130,000.<sup>13</sup> The city's nearly self-contained "Colored Village" of the 1850s that I was there to study no longer existed. In fact, it was so rare to see another black person that each time I encountered one I was compelled to make small talk with them. This was quite a contrast from my predominantly black graduate school and largely black neighborhood in Washington, D.C. where I lived at the time. Although the contrast was striking, I felt quite comfortable in this environment, having grown up in a predominantly white community and school district in Rochester. Unwarranted racial-based treatment was much easier to deal with as an adult than as a young child or teenager seeking to grasp the harsh reality of bigotry. The slight gestures of prejudice directed toward me in Canada were trivial, compared to the name-calling and harsh treatment I had endured by the age of eighteen in the United States. In addition, when faced with a white majority, I have learned not to feel pressured by a need to represent the entire black race, but to simply be myself.

Blacks in Canada comprise a relatively small community, but by no means are they a homogenous group. They descend from Canadian

slaves, American Revolutionary Loyalists and War of 1812 veterans, as well as U. S. fugitives from the pre-Civil War era. It is estimated that some 30,000 to 35,000 blacks entered the British colony prior to the American Civil War.<sup>14</sup> In the 1860s, a considerable number of those individuals partook in a reverse migration back across the international lines to America. The Nadir<sup>15</sup> (1865–1930) and aftermath marked a low point for blacks entering Canada. The doorway to the country was open to them primarily to do the work that white Canadians did not want to perform. These undesirable jobs were dirty, low-paying, difficult, and dangerous. In other words, railroad construction, coal mining, farm clearing, and brute factory employment were all grounds for entrance.

By the early 1960s, Canada retracted its race-based immigration policy, which opened the door to a significant number of blacks from African and Caribbean nations. They migrated from Egypt, Somalia, Ghana, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Haiti, and many other countries as a result of political repression, civil wars, and ethnic unrest, as well as economic conditions.<sup>16</sup> The spectrum of blacks does not end there. Anglophone and Francophone blacks live in Canada. Some blacks are first-generation immigrants, while others are well accustomed to the Canadian lifestyle. I met Jamaicans and Dominicans living far away from their tropical homelands, Kenyans who spoke Swahili within their family nucleus and toiled to learn English and French, as well as descendants of freedmen and runaways from Maryland and Virginia, who knew the county their ancestors were from. Overall, the nation's demographics of non-European immigrants have blossomed, whereas immigrants from traditional places like the United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe have dropped.<sup>17</sup>

Generally speaking, in Canada blacks and whites showed a high level of interest in my work. I had coffee with a Brock University professor who explained to me that Canadian students are usually more interested in United States history than their own. American history is characterized by dramatic and controversial events: the American Revolutionary War, mass black slavery, the bloody Civil War, as well as Southern segregation and the numerous 1960s movements. Canadians tend to regard the events more appealing than comparable Canadian events such as the Ontario Beaver Wars, the peaceful Canadian Confederation of 1867, which united the provinces into a single country under the British commonwealth, scant black human bondage, and the 1960s Quiet Revolution characterized by the Quebec provincial government taking control over education, health

care, and constructing infrastructure that aided the welfare of the entire state. Of course, the soaring interest in the United States occurs as a result of popular culture and the allure of all-things-American. In general, people prefer history that is theatrical, and certainly on many counts the United States' past outdoes Canada in this regard. The American twists and turns, the extreme personalities, and shocking events draw people in.

Tightened border and a weakened dollar did not diminish the interest that blacks and whites in Canada expressed in my research and its emphasis on the close ties between the two countries. The historic links between blacks in Canada and the United States were well recognized and remained a recognized part of the physical memory of the Canada's cultural landscape. One example is Salem Chapel BME that I briefly discussed above. Construction began in October of 1851, in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which increased the flow of American runaway slaves to the British territory. The church was completed in four years and dedicated on November 15, 1855.<sup>18</sup> A testament to the quality of the structure, the BME Church is still standing today on the corner of Geneva and North Streets, once the focal point of black life in the city.

When I first arrived in St. Catharines and drove down Geneva Street, the BME Church stood out among the storefronts and residential homes. From the outside it resembled a Baptist Church of the American South, though it was in the midst of Canada's Niagara Peninsula. The church looked totally out of place. I had seen similar churches in Maryland and Virginia. I discovered that the distinctive Southern-style architecture was indeed a unique edifice to the building scenery of Ontario. It plainly reflected the black newcomers to St. Catharines from the United States, fugitive and free, that toiled to erect the temple in the early 1850s. Today, Salem Chapel is regarded as architecturally significant to the city of St. Catharines and bears a historical designation. I attended service one Sunday morning and received a tour of the interior. The original uneven walnut timber planking, wrought iron pulpit, and rounded staircase leading to the church's gallery level are still intact. Salem Chapel offers evidence that black fugitives retained aspects of the *old* country on Canadian soil, even when it came to concepts of construction and design.

Looking deeper into the background of Salem Chapel, I found that it was originally organized as an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and maintained links to this African American denomination founded by Richard Allen until 1856, when the church officers

grew weary of conducting affairs over the border, where the threat of recapture loomed through the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the reconfiguration as the BME did not discontinue their transnational interactions for this borderland black community. Black American clergy continued to take the pulpit and maintained relationships with abolitionists outside Canadian limits. Most significantly, Salem Chapel continued to provide refuge to fugitive newcomers, inserting new energy into St. Catharines' black community and directly engaging the struggle against slavery in the United States. Like most exiles they were still interested in the dealings of the land they left behind. The BME Church symbolized the desire of blacks from the United States to maintain connections that stretched beyond the politically defined international border. Laypeople and officers embraced me at the church like a long-lost brother coming back to trace my roots in Canada.

As I gathered sources to reconstruct this history, my being from the United States seemed fitting to the task. It certainly did not serve as an obstacle. In fact, I made my American-ness more of an issue than the Canadians with whom I interacted. The ease with which I worked in Canada is a testament to the shared cultures and histories between our two countries. Indeed, the relative insignificance of the problems that I did encounter speaks to these commonalities. For example, when I asked a Canadian geography professor to review a section from a draft of my dissertation to clarify a few questions I had about the growth of St. Catharines in the 1800s he told me that when writing on Canada I must spell words in the British custom. Therefore, labour should not be written labor, and so forth. Yet, once we talked through the issue and it was acknowledged that my spelling was appropriate for research based at a United States university and writing for a United States audience, he agreed to read my draft with its "misspelled words."

I also found some proud Canadians who felt that their country was superior to the United States, because of the "mild" nature of Canadian slavery. For me, this was interesting because such perspectives failed to account for differences in geography and climate. If Canada had the same climate as Georgia their slave population and conduct toward blacks would have most likely been equal. The relatively low number of slaves in Canada had more to do with climate than the goodwill of its citizens. With such a short growing season it was neither practical nor profitable to have a large number of enslaved persons. But these are not arguments that I pursued, rather they served

as points of differences that illuminated for me the subtle distinctions between the United States and Canada.

Despite their pride in having relatively limited slavery, Canada is not an exception to stigmatization and discrimination against blacks. A nation can never think it has arrived at excellent race relations; it is something that has to be worked at on a regular basis. Besides, all nations have historical blunders and current issues. Black Canadians have to deal with segregation in schools, hotels, and restaurants as well. It is a matter of acknowledging and confronting these matters, instead of acting like they do not exist or concealing them from the masses. The blacks I interacted with in Canada articulated their discontent about racism chiefly behind closed doors or in small groups of trusted friends and family. They were skeptical of sharing with racial outsiders and cautious of public expression of their sincere thoughts. This code of silence occurs routinely, but it is broken for overt acts of animosity and grievances such as police brutality or clear workplace bigotry.

Interracial marriage in Canada is helping to break the inward and privatized conversations among blacks. With so many different kinds of people living and pouring into the North American country, coexistence is increasing incidence of intermarriage. Diversity and density in the cosmopolitan metropolis contributes heavily to this occurrence. Irish, Germans, and Russians are wedding those of African descent, and I met individuals of Afro-Asian and Afro-Latino backgrounds who are the outcome of diasporas merging together in Canada. The imminent relationships and matrimony of two individuals have forced others to come together and tackle age-old stereotypes and problems. Yet, the trend of interracial couples cannot totally eliminate entrenched racial sentiments, like an active public willing to directly grapple with the tough questions and discourse of race. Despite concern, in the midst of the diverse Canadian mosaic of people, blacks have maintained their distinct identity.

Blacks in Canada, similar to the rest of the African diaspora, have unique cultural markers, and take their Canadian identity seriously. Blacks have fought for full membership into society, regardless of potential repercussions, and have battled racism on all frontiers including education, criminal justice, and mass media. They have made significant contributions to the liveliness of Canadian culture, despite their limited numerical strength that has restricted their negotiating power. In comparison to other visible minorities, blacks have remained by and large at the bottom of the social order. They battle for equality with groups such as the Chinese and East Indians who

have achieved great success in employment.<sup>20</sup> Black Canadians also face political lip service and window dressing of institutional racism, comparable to others throughout the black Atlantic world.

Nonetheless black culture in Canada remains vibrant, especially where the population is abundant. New immigrants from African and Caribbean nations continue to be welcomed. These individuals are not business-class immigrants and most struggle to climb the socio-economic hierarchy. Disappointingly, the ethnic conflicts among the newcomers that existed in their native countries persist in Canada and the meeting of blacks from around the world within the Canadian context has not translated into automatic kindred feelings and unity. Infighting is commonly waged, but when outsiders attack them, blacks in Canada find ways to work together with rapidity. There is also a divide between Canadian-born and foreign-born blacks, yet I witness them bonding in unison for religious sermons, culture celebrations, and social organizations. Being so small in number in Canada, blacks pull together chiefly out of sheer necessity rather than fondness for one another.

Researching in Canada for an extended period of time was indeed eye opening. Being there to conduct formal academic research, I was far more conscious of my surroundings than I had been as a youngster. It was plain to me that black Canadian culture is simply not a continuum of the African American experience. And the difference between America and Canada is more than measuring distances in miles or kilometers, or having a Congress versus a Parliament, or even spelling words in the English language another way, for instance colour instead of color. The history of these neighboring nations has unfolded in contrasting ways. These distinguishing features caused blacks in the 1850s American-Canadian borderlands to be a divided people forced to deal with the intersection of two separate political realms. Though September 11 security measures have restrained the fluid frontier of traffic between the nations, it still exists today. Like the rest of the African diaspora, blacks in Canada have unique cultural elements, worthy of the same respect and historical attention as others. Their small numbers should not leave them back in the shadows of the black Atlantic world.

## Notes

1. This figure includes the Alaska border of 1,538 miles (2,475 kilometers).
2. Also known as August First Day, Emancipation Day, and West India Day.

3. “Loonie” is a bronze-plated, one-dollar coin, which has the image of a common loon, a well-known Canadian bird engraved on its surface obverse to Queen Elizabeth II. Introduced in 1996, the “Toonie” (also spelled: Twoonie, Twoney, and Tooney) is a bimetallic two-dollar coin that has an illustration of a polar bear imprinted on it, obverse to Queen Elizabeth II.
4. Brock University is located in St. Catharines, while York University is in Toronto.
5. Located just over 100 miles from Detroit in Elgin County, southwestern Ontario.
6. Southeast of Detroit, in a part of Ontario that is on the shores of Lake Erie.
7. T. P. Casey ran ads between: *St. Catharines Journal*, November 25, 1847 and *Evening Journal* (St. Catharines), September 25, 1865.
8. Rev. Robert Ker, ed. *Marriage Records: St. George’s Parish Church, 1841–1891* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Historic & Centenary Review, 1998).
9. *St. Catharines Constitutional*, June 10, 1857, p. 3.
10. *St. Catharines Journal*, April 29, 1858.
11. Nicholas Keung, “A City of Unmatched Diversity,” *Toronto Star*, December 5, 2007.
12. Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experience, Social Conditions* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing Co, 2006), 23, 85.
13. Canada Census, 2006.
14. Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I’ve Got A Home In Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), xv.
15. In his book *The Negro in America Life and Thought* (New York, NY: Dial, 1954), historian Rayford Logan termed American race relations from the period of 1877 to 1901, “the *Nadir*” meaning the lowest point. Logan argues that when the Union troops were removed from the South in 1877, thus ending Reconstruction, blacks were oppressed worse than any period before or since, including slavery. The authoritative work of historian Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997; reprint from 1971) applies this term to the black Canadian experience.
16. Mensah, *The Black Canadians*, 71–86.
17. *Ibid.*, 1.
18. *St. Catharines Constitutional*, October 31, 1855.
19. Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel D. Rupwate, “A Historical Significance of the “Salem Chapel” with reference to the Underground Railroad Movement and A Tribute to Harriet Tubman.” (Rt. Rev. Dr. Daniel D. Rupwate: St. Catharines, Ontario, 2006), 20–24.
20. Mensah, *The Black Canadians*, 229–232 and 258–259.

## The Strange Life of Lusotropicalism in Luanda: On Race, Nationality, Gender, and Sexuality in Angola

Jessica Krug

In the summer of 2007, I went to Angola for the first time. It was a crucial juncture for me and a critical point for the nation of Angola. I planned to spend four months in the country, studying the Kimbundu language at the Universidade Agostinho Neto and conducting preliminary dissertation research on the intellectual history of identity in Kisama, a region south of Luanda and the Kwanza River. While I hoped to spend some time in Kisama, the bulk of my work would take place in Luanda, and I was quickly—very quickly—thrown into the deep-end of the *vida luandense* (life in Luanda). Inadvertently, I arrived on the thirtieth anniversary of the 1977 coup attempt against the ruling MPLA government and the unchecked violent repression and strife that followed, lucidly described by historian David Birmingham as, “the day when the Angolan dream began to unravel.”<sup>1</sup> On this particular anniversary of the unraveling, the nation was deep in a public relations campaign, aimed duly at its own increasingly aggrieved citizens and an amorphous “international community.”

As a prelude to long-promised legislative elections,<sup>2</sup> which also coincided with my arrival, the Interministerial Commission for the Electoral Process (CIPE) and the National Electoral Commission (CNE) organized a massive, mandatory voter registration drive. Visual and auditory representations of *angolanidade* (the state of being Angolan; a person’s Angolan-ness) as conceived by the government dominated television, radio, and streets in the form of billboards, including,

curiously enough, the often-controversial *musseque*-born kúduro artist Dog Murras.<sup>3</sup> Nearly as pervasive were ads for Afrobasket 2007, an Africa-wide basketball tournament hosted in Luanda at the end of that August.

Not only did the ads for Afrobasket depict officially sanctioned images of a robustly athletic *angolanidade*, they also featured fascinating—if perplexing—insight into the Angolan government’s capitalism-infused view of *africanidade*. Day after day, I caught snippets of the ads from cars or on friends’ televisions, and would ask, in amazement, how an artist most famous for writing music glorifying marijuana smoking can be perceived as a suitable representative of African unity. No one had any answers for me.

The inability of every Luandan resident whom I asked to comprehend the government’s intentions behind inviting the musician Afroman to Afrobasket reflects the contested nature of *angolanidade* and its position within the broader African diaspora. The meaning of *angolanidade* is quarried and debated every day on the streets of Luanda. In contextualizing and grappling with some of these iterations of twenty-first-century popular Luandan conceptions of *angolanidade* in all of its racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized textures, I hope to more fully illuminate the terrain on which these questions are asked, and to situate them within a broader field of African diasporic studies. Examining how everyday Angolans construct themselves in opposition to the ways in which they conceive of state power, I suggest that the development of Angolan nationalism must be reimaged as an ongoing struggle by nonelite actors. It is important to remember that both men and women in Luanda are engaged in the everyday battle to define *angolanidade* in both its masculine and feminine incarnations. However, in this chapter, I focus on the ways in which masculinity and the construction of alternative *angolanidades* intersect, as a means to better understand tensions between the state and the *povo* (the people, in Portuguese, is a singular noun and refers to the kinds of everyday, nonelite actors with whom the chapter primarily engages).

## Speaking Culture in the Realm of the Political

Compared with existing literature for other African nations, there is relatively little scholarly research on the development of Angolan nationalism. As Marissa Moorman observes, the existing literature privileges the political over the cultural as a reaction to Portugal’s use

of the culturalist theory of lusotropicalism to defend the prolonged occupation of its colonies.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to distance themselves from apologist rhetoric of the imperialists, historians have been insufficiently critical of current ruling-party narratives, which credit *assimilados*<sup>5</sup> and mulattos<sup>6</sup> in Luanda in the 1940s and 1950s with creating the idea of an independent Angolan nation. There are a few important, recent exceptions.<sup>7</sup> Because this chapter locates the meaningful work of forging the idea of Angolan nationalism on the streets, and in the hands, mouths, and bodies of the *povo*, it is necessary first to briefly outline the lusotropicalist ideas that form the ideological backboard and inevitable absent referent in this discussion.

Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's philosophy of lusotropicalism, initially presented in his 1933 publication *Casa-grande e senzala* (usually glossed as *Masters and Slaves* in English), originally functioned less to glorify the Portuguese nation than to create an argument for the uniqueness and viability of Brazilian national culture in a form not uncommon throughout Latin America.<sup>8</sup> As in other nations where the ostensible, ambiguously cultural/biological "creoleness" of the former colony was utilized by elites to articulate a right to self-determination,<sup>9</sup> Freyre sought to distance Brazil from an incapacitating belief that modernity was purely and solely European. In Freyre's initial articulation, Brazil lacked the virulent racism of North America because of the predilection of Portuguese men for miscegenation with indigenous and African women. Freyre argued that Portuguese men provided willing sadism to these women's inherently masochistic tendencies. While in this early period Freyre was speaking specifically about Brazil, the gendered and sexualized dimensions of his racial and national discourse are vitally important for understanding the later application of his work to the colonial context of Angola. In Freyre's nostalgic, romanticized, eroticized conception of the Brazilian nation as modeled on the *casa grande*, there is little space for black or indigenous men.

Women of color, and particularly mulattas, served in Freyre's analysis as the objects of desire for Portuguese men; their sole purpose is to fulfill the sexual and physical needs of white men. Men of color recede into the background, serving only as unseen—and more importantly, unvoiced—labor. Freyre's argument that miscegenation produced the Brazilian nation is definitively unidirectional. White women appear in Freyre's work frequently enough to evince jealousy over their husbands' attractions to women of color, but not often enough to exhibit desire toward African or indigenous men.

In the world that Freyre constructs, white masculinity is in no small part forged through the sexual conquest of black and mulatta women, while black masculinity is conspicuously absent from a discussion that purports to represent the character of Brazilian society at large. This gendered aspect of the highly sexually charged racial construct of lusotropicalism generates inevitable questions. What is the place of black males in a world where only white male desire is given voice? What is the place of mulattos in the lusotropicalist world that accommodates mulattas only as idealized sex objects?

As many have noted, the Portuguese *Estado Novo* adopted lusotropicalism only in the post–World War II period,<sup>10</sup> and *Casa-grande e senzala* was not published in Portugal until 1957.<sup>11</sup> In the face of successful proindependence struggles across Africa and throughout the globe, the economically marginal Portuguese empire attempted to recast itself as a benevolent cultural enterprise, and the colonies not as *colonies* but rather as overseas territories of Portugal. Salazar sponsored Freyre’s travels throughout the empire in 1951–1952, and from these travels he produced *Aventura e rotina*,<sup>12</sup> a work that ignores history and power in favor of simplistic similarity-seeking between Brazil and Africa in service of valorizing the Portuguese. As Rémy Lucas notes, in 1950, 0.7 percent of the African population of Angola was classified as *assimilado*, after nearly 500 years of Portuguese colonialism—surely a colossal failure of lusotropicalism.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps even more damning to Freyre’s desire to apply his Brazilian plantation fantasies throughout the empire is the fact that in 1950, only 1.10 percent of Angolans were registered as the *mestiços*<sup>14</sup> that Freyre promised Portuguese colonialism inevitably produced. Assimilation and miscegenation never ameliorated racism in Africa or in the Americas, even to the negligible extent to which either occurred.

If Freyre remained determinedly unaware of the sizeable chasm between his perception of lusotropicalist paradise and the realities he confronted in both Africa and Brazil, in what historical context can we place the sexual and gendered politics of race, class, and nation in the minds of present-day Luandans? Do ideas embraced by the *Estado Novo* of the imperialists have any bearing on the day-to-day life of nonelites in Luanda? After five decades of pervasive socialist discourse in Luanda, do race and class matter? In the next section, I will explore the historical context within which everyday Angolans understand the relationship between race, class, and nation.

## “Angola É Governado Por Mulatos, Mas Foi Destruída Pelos Negros”<sup>15</sup>

The belief that political and economic power in present-day Angola is in the hands of mulattos and foreigners is perhaps the most common of commonsense wisdom on the streets of Luanda. Angolans and others concerned with Angolan affairs widely subscribe to the notion that economic and political power is the domain of mulattos. Assis Malaquis, for example, wrote in a 2000 article on the role of ethnicity in the wartime economy of Angola that “mixed-race Angolans (*mulattos*) control the economy. This group has filled the space left by the departing Portuguese settlers who owned most economic enterprises in the country.” Yet he does not provide a single footnote or piece of empirical evidence to support his claim.<sup>16</sup> Another vivid example comes from a January 3, 1997 article in the independent Angolan newspaper *Folha 8* about issues with the management of the Angolan national airline, TAAG. William Jonet, the author, discusses how Miguel Costa, then director, was the first BaKongo<sup>17</sup> to head the company. He relates that:

The most radical [of Costa’s critics] won’t stop criticizing him for privileging—or continuing to permit that—the majority of crew members are of the mestiço ethnicity. “They are also Angolans,” justifies Miguel Costa before his detractors. In this hour, in which we are all Angolans with equal rights, it is time to stop with the preferences that plague TAAG and to fly it to a better equilibrium, and if that doesn’t happen, at least adjust the scale of the crew members so that some passenger doesn’t think that apartheid has been transferred to Angola.<sup>18</sup>

Comparing the situation at TAAG to apartheid illustrates not only the depth of disgust at the continued economic and political power of the mulatto minority, but also challenges the ruling party that prided itself on an alliance with the African National Congress and other groups during the antiapartheid struggle. Just a few weeks later, *Folha 8* reported on a strike in Luanda in which the aggrieved workers complained of the management “promot[ing] a policy of] ‘a removal of the entire mass of Black workers and substituting them for mestiços and whites.’”<sup>19</sup> Following this theme, the title of this section, “Angola É Governado Por Mulatos, Mas Foi Destruída Pelos Negros,” taken from two folk sayings debated on an Angolan on-line forum (the first one attributed to blacks, the second to mulattos by way of rejoinder),

elicited many varied responses; none of them contested that mulattos actually wield the real political and economic power in the nation. Indeed, taking this commonsense knowledge paired with another—a belief that José Eduardo dos Santos and many of his inner circle are Sãotomean<sup>20</sup>—means that many Luandans believe that *angolanidade* and political and economic power do not typically coexist, but rather are distinct and often adversarial forces.

Without being too anachronistic, it is possible to trace the history of the notion that mulattos and Sãotomeans gain wealth and power at the expense of common Angolans back to at least the early sixteenth century. The Portuguese crown identified the initially uninhabited island of São Tomé as an ideal site for intensive sugar cane cultivation by 1485, and by the early sixteenth century had begun the intensive importation of enslaved Africans. By the 1520s, the Manikongo Afonso I, who maintained formal diplomatic relations with Portugal, would complain about the presence of Tomista traders in his kingdom.<sup>21</sup> These infamous traders did not respect the treaties that were supposed to protect Kongo citizens from enslavement. They were also responsible for extending the slave trade south of the kingdom of Kongo proper deeper into what is now Angola.<sup>22</sup> Mulattos from São Tomé are prevalent in the documents detailing the initial and ongoing Portuguese establishment of control in Luanda and the Kwanza River region from 1575 onward.<sup>23</sup> In a direct way, the violence of the Portuguese slave trade and colonialism was first brought to Angola via São Tomé, and it is difficult to imagine how mulattos, Sãotomeans, wealth, and violence did not begin to form at least a tentatively linked image in the minds of Angolans by the sixteenth century.

Mulattos were long central to Portuguese military campaigns in Angola and to Portuguese colonial efforts in general. Cadornega mentions the prevalence and importance of mulatto soldiers (possibly from either Angola or Brazil) in the seventeenth-century wars of conquest in the interior.<sup>24</sup> Many of the *degradados*—or prisoners forcibly exiled to one of the colonies by Portuguese law—sent by the Portuguese to forcibly colonize Angola were Brazilian mulattos. He wrote that “between 1714 and 1719, for example, 40% of *degradados* sent to Luanda came from Brazil, while 60% were of Portuguese origin...90% of the ‘Brazilians’ were mulattos.”<sup>25</sup> There was ongoing discussion in Portugal about the appropriate role for mulattos in the armed forces in Angola. The terms of the debate shifted with the importance of the mulatto soldiers in Portuguese strikes against Matamba in the 1680s, at which point Lisbon ordered the colony

to pay them the same wages as white soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, for the peasants, fugitives from slavery, and independent leaders and their followers who fought against the Portuguese in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no small portion of the image of conquest and dominance would have been the mulatto, who, regardless of his position in relation to the whites in Angola, enjoyed tremendous power and wealth in comparison with nonelite Angolans.

Throughout the eighteenth century, locally rooted mulattos had considerable clout in the trans-Atlantic slave trade from Angola, expanding from their old strongholds in Luanda and along the Kwanza and other rivers where they “owned or operated slave-worked agricultural properties of modest size.”<sup>27</sup> Joseph Miller argues that the eighteenth-century Angolan mulatto culture “appeared clearly African to shocked government officials just out from metropolitan Portugal, but it was no less strongly Portuguese from the point of view of most Africans.”<sup>28</sup> While locally based mulattos would lose much of their power in global economic terms by the end of the eighteenth century,<sup>29</sup> there is no doubt that the roots of the wealth and power of the “old” mulatto families of Luanda are deeply intertwined with the history of the slave trade. Bilingualism and continued connections to local communities gave these traders much of their economic influence in the interior, but their ongoing participation in and enrichment from the violent economy of slavery meant that everyday people could frame their moral critiques in terms of the otherness of the mulattos who benefited from and appeared to run it.

Even with their economic power waning in global terms, mulatto families continued to be tremendously influential in nineteenth-century Luanda. Iconic among these prestigious figures is Ana Joaquina dos Santos Silva, an infamously wealthy slave trader who owned substantial property in both Angola and Brazil. She was Luanda-born, the daughter of a local mulatta and a Portuguese white, and had well-known influence with Muàtiânvua-Noéhi, ruler of Lunda between 1820 and 1851, who supplied her with vassals as slaves.<sup>30</sup> In the same period, the mulatto writers whom Rosa Silva e Cruz and Jacopo Corrado credit with forging an early and now-neglected form of Angolan nationalism—writers like José da Silva Maia Ferreira, Ernesto Marecos, and Eduardo Neves—coined the terms “filho da terra” (son of the land), “filho do país” (son of the country), and “Angolense” to describe a new identity they developed through their poems, newspapers, and other writing. Significantly, many of this generation of writers would incorporate elements of Kimbundu into their writing,<sup>31</sup>

thus forging a link between speaking national languages and *angolanidade*, perhaps the longest-lasting link between these nineteenth-century mulatto writers and current, popular conceptions of Angolan nationalism.<sup>32</sup> As Corrado explains, the post-1975 political climate has deprivileged identification with these earlier elites, illustrated visibly in the 1999 destruction of Ana Joaquina dos Santos Silva's mansion.<sup>33</sup> Those in power now attempt to project themselves as virile, masculine, black, and wholly Angolan—an attempt that overt identification with nineteenth-century mulatto elites would obviously problematize. Regardless, the everyday people of Luanda continue to identify those in power as “other”—as mulatto, as foreign, as less or differently masculine. The oppositional identity that Luandans construct for themselves is situated within a broader framework of black Atlantic signifiers.

## A Luta Continua: Popular Music, Masculinity, and Angolanidade

The petroleum and diamond industries yield tremendous wealth, yet the United Nations Development Program on the Human Poverty Index ranks Angola 118th out of 135 nations with a 38.5 percent chance of a person not surviving to age 40, a 32.6 percent adult illiteracy rate, 49 percent of people not using an improved source of water, and 31 percent of children under age 5 as underweight.<sup>34</sup> Angola is in the position of needing to sell a particular image of itself to its own people. As mentioned above, Dog Murras was a prominent feature of the 2007 campaign by the Angolan government to register voters (registration is mandatory) for the legislative election of September 5, 2008—only the second in Angola's history. In a country that has never conducted a national census<sup>35</sup> and has a long history both pre- and post-independence of labor and military conscription, the fears that these registration drives were a mere prelude to being drafted or worse compelled many Angolans throughout the country to avoid the registration process.<sup>36</sup>

In what was widely recognized as an effort to speak to *musseque* youth in their own language, the government enlisted the help of the dazzlingly popular king of *kúduro* music, Dog Murras, himself a denizen of the *musseques* and broadly known for crediting *musseque* residents with a superior creativity for having generated both the older *semba* and the more recent *kúduro*.<sup>37</sup> Here, Dog Murras echoes

tropes from the broader African diaspora, from the North American forms of jazz and hip-hop to the North American/Caribbean forms of salsa and reggaeton, to Jamaica's reggae and dancehall to Brazil's samba. In each case, prominent artists and innovators within genres that emerge from the most marginal members of society, relegated to the most marginal of spaces, identify their creativity with an oppositional culture. The credibility of the music—both for those on the margins and for the broader audiences that inevitably appropriate the forms and make them commercial successes—hinges on the authenticity with which the artist is understood as being able to speak for the struggle of living in the *musseque*, the 'hood, the barrio, the shantytown, or the favela.

Collapsed within this spatial identification is a nearly universal set of nested identities. These underdeveloped, violent, marginal, impoverished urban locations are, after all, where “blackness” is located in the popular imagination. Connected to urban marginality and blackness, as Greg Tate argues, is a perception of “hip[ness], stylish[ness], youthful[ness], alienat[ion], rebellious[ness], [and] sensual[ity],”<sup>38</sup> qualities directly opposed to the staid, decadent, mulatto character attributed by many Luandans to the government and structures of power. In order to compel the very people most alienated by the Angolan government and its revolving backdrop of broken promises to comply with a voter registration campaign, the government tried to tap into and appropriate these sexy, compelling qualities for its own purposes.<sup>39</sup>

An interesting comparative to this campaign from elsewhere in the African diaspora is the cynical 2004 “Vote or Die” push by rap artist P. Diddy in the United States of America. Following the internationally denounced 2000 election, in which George W. Bush's election was accomplished through the illegal disenfranchisement of thousands of black voters, P. Diddy's campaign was a highly transparent attempt to try to appropriate youthful black hipness for political participation. Black youth voting rates in 2004 were 11 percent higher than 2000.<sup>40</sup> In the United States, using a rapper to encourage young people to vote in the wake of massive black disenfranchisement can be read as another example of the attempt to publicize relevance to a neglected and marginalized segment of the population.

Fifteen years after officially abandoning Marxist principles, while the Angolan government still attempts to present itself as serving the *povo*, it at least recognizes the sizeable gap between party *militantes* and *musseque* residents. Using Dog Murras as a visual and auditory

signifier of Angolan civic duty by plastering his image on billboards and flooding the television and radio with his preregistration song was a definitive signal of official recognition that the *povo* did not look at the face of aging party bureaucrats and see itself reflected. And while Dog Murras may have been far enough outside of official party circles and *musseque*-identified enough to have popular credibility, his prominent Che Guevara tattoo, military camouflage, and constant use of Angolan flags on his and his dancers' shirts during performances located him comfortably within familiar MPLA iconic territory. Indeed, the government was so confident in Dog Murras that he was given honors by the Angolan Ministry of Culture for having helped in the development of national culture in 2007. He was a young man bristling with virile masculinity shaped through identification with both the older, pervasive image of the *fapla* and through the black Atlantic signifier of hypermasculinized ghetto musical artistry.

Not long after Dog Murras became an officially sanctioned symbol of a hypermasculine yet politically compliant if aesthetically transgressive *angolanidade*, he would cross the government's line. His song "Angola Bwé de Caras" (The Many Faces of Angola), which articulates the widely felt but seldom voiced sense of betrayal of Angolan citizens by the MPLA, was censored by the Radio Nacional Angola (RNA), a censorship order that was later rescinded.<sup>41</sup> "Angola Bwé de Caras" succinctly describes the popular belief that Angola is being run by and for the benefit of everyone *but* Angolans. In this song, Dog Murras contrasts the "beautiful Angola" available to various nationalities of Africans, South Americans, Asians, and Europeans, characterized by the "development, investment, and only success" with the various and deadly ills that are the daily experience of most Angolans, from "malaria, typhoid fever, and lots of diarrhea" to non-existent class mobility.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the brief period of censorship on the national radio, Dog Murras' song also earned him the censure of Tchizé dos Santos, journalist and daughter of the president. On February 7, 2008, Dos Santos wrote in the *Seminário Angolense* that all Angolans, rich and poor, must unite to solve Angola's problems. She argued for a unity of Angolan experience based on the fact that all suffer and all dance to kúduro on the weekends in order to forget their problems. She further claimed that "the Chinese are not to blame for our historical inheritance that has brought with it few Angolan companies that can do the work that they do as rapidly." Obfuscating the incredible difference in

the experiences of rich and poor Angolans and the reality of foreign control of most major building projects and sources of wealth in the country, Dos Santos sought to create a disingenuous *angolanidade* that embraces the discourse of suffering and the artistic products of those who suffer, but which offers no solutions and no concrete programs other than continued silent suffering for the *povo*. This order of pacification, presented under the typical excuse that solutions are not possible after only a few brief years of peace,<sup>43</sup> was an intolerable response for many Angolans.

The consequences of not remaining silent are real and brutal. The memory of the violent repression in the wake of the May 27, 1977 coup attempt is still very much alive for all Luandans, who receive periodic memory boosters in the form of continued, unregulated police brutality in the service of the maintenance of the one-party state. For example, in June 2008, in the same *musseque*, Sambizanga, where the police murdered and beat the majority of their victims in 1977, the police again killed eight young men who were assembled under the single working streetlight in the area. The men were found shot facedown in the street.<sup>44</sup> It is impossible to forget the violent repression of meaningful political dissent because it is not yet over, and popular constructions of *angolanidade* must contend with this reality.

In late November 2003, the Angolan presidential guard forcibly took a 27-year-old Luandan man named Arsénio “Cherokee” Sebastião, who supported his family by washing cars on the streets, to the crowded seaside in the middle of the day, beat him, and then drowned him. The guard tortured Sebastião to death for singing the banned rapper Mc K’s song “A Técnica, as Causas e as Consequências” (The Technique, Causes, and Consequences) in public.<sup>45</sup> Mc K is perhaps the most anomalous of Angolan artists. He is wildly popular; everyone knows him, even though none of his songs can be legally played. He produces his music himself, and tried to release his first album anonymously, because he was afraid of being killed. On the streets of Luanda, no one is entirely sure why the government *has not* killed him. While he has adopted a more visible presence in recent years, performing publicly and allowing his image to be associated with his music, his lyrics remain unequivocally and explicitly critical of the government.

In the song for which Sebastião was murdered, Mc K directly names the MPLA as the responsible party for the deplorable condition, reworking the party acronym to label the party “the Popular

Manipulation of Angolan Trash” and describing how “The daily life shows us the color of the chain that binds us/Black on the bottom, red on top and yellow in the middle.” He condemns the imbalance between the machinery of violence and pacification, such as weaponry and bars, and the true tools of civil development, like libraries and universities. Speaking to the rare nature of direct political protest post-1977, Mc K argues that the people’s silence should not be mistaken for ignorance or blindness.<sup>46</sup>

With lyrics like these, speaking truth to power from the position of the dislocated, the mutilated, the demobilized, and the refugee, Mc K draws a clear distinction between the Angolan people and the “popular manipulation of Angolan trash.” He is one Angolan who refuses to be manipulated, and who publicly proclaims that the silent majority of Angolans are not buying into the government’s techniques, either. Using the genre of hip-hop to embody a message of popular empowerment for the marginalized through a global black Atlantic vernacular, Mc K conveys his particularly Angolan message.

During the summer of 2007, however, it was impossible for me to remain unaware of the complex nature of hip-hop in Angola. While Mc K’s use of hip-hop as a vernacular for confronting governmental oppression can be directly connected to the roots of the art form, it stands alongside the unquestionable local popularity of commercially oriented, overtly apolitical foreign artists. That summer, the most popular of rappers in Luanda was undoubtedly 50 Cent. Perplexingly, his music seemed omnipresent and his image equally so adorning the front of many young men’s t-shirts. As saturated as Luanda was with his image, I found myself engaged in several conversations about hip-hop, 50 Cent, and the state of blackness in America with both friends and casual acquaintances.

The very Luandans who seemed the most attracted to 50 Cent were those who his music [mis]represents: young black men on the extreme economic and political margins of urban life. Just as Dog Murras and Mc K build on globalized symbols of resistant black masculinity in their music and self-presentation, however, the Luandan fans of 50 Cent evoke an alternative identity to that of those in power. Fans of all of these musicians are part of a construction of an *angolanidade* that presents an alternative to the monopoly of power by aging party cronies, foreigners, and mulattos. While Dog Murras and Mc K address the specificities of present-day life in Luanda, allowing for their listeners to participate in a challenge to the system, 50 Cent operates within an American semantic universe, working with signs and

symbols relevant to the very different political context of the United States. However, by articulating a deeply personalized connection to 50 Cent, as did many of the young men with whom I discussed his music, these Luandans are constructing an *angolanidade* that contests the ruling party no less.

This version of *angolanidade* addresses the particular and the local *through* the global. Though the considerable wealth of the nation is controlled by the immeasurably few—defined by the *povo* as mulatto and foreign—the understanding of masculine identity remains irrevocably tied to material wealth and what is often viewed as a direct correlate, the ability to attract quantities of a certain kind of woman. While mulattos are nearly universally reviled by everyday Angolans as being in nepotistic, racist control of economic and political power, *mulattas* are seen by many of the same people as objects of intense desire and as symbols of social and economic success. Through my own experiences in Luanda, where regardless of the actual facts of my own identity I was nearly universally read at first glance as a mulatta and likely Brazilian, I can attest to the almost surreal staying power of this lusotropicalist trope on Luanda's streets. Derived less from a familiarity with *Estado Novo* politics or Freyrian theories and more from the wild popularity of Brazilian telenovelas, mulattas remain a symbol of both the hypersexualized and the well-to-do. Indeed, the 2007 Miss Angola, Micaela Reis, seems to embody the very essence of this still highly desired mulatta. In the words of one of my male friends explaining a sudden boost in his popularity and esteem at work after having been seen out with me, if you can keep a mulatta, you must be doing well.

50 Cent's self-representation—even and perhaps especially for those who cannot comprehend a single word of his rhymes—perfectly combines the hypermasculinity of the marginal with the economic power and unbridled access to women, especially light-skinned women and/or mulattas. In nearly all of his videos, yet perhaps most graphically in “P.I.M.P.,” a song that was wildly popular in Luanda in the summer of 2007, 50 Cent is surrounded by a literal harem of women who range in complexion but are skewed toward shades that would be labeled mulatta in Angola.<sup>47</sup> Both 50 Cent and the women parade about in symbols of wealth—the fancy cars, expensive liquor, and ostentatious jewelry and clothing that are the signature of present-day American “bling culture.” 50 Cent has everything that the everyday young Luandan man never will. And while he is not Angolan, he is a dark-skinned black man who retains the body language and self-

presentation style of a person from the margins. In essence, he provides a narrative of an alternative *angolanidade*—at least via fantasy—in which any *musseque* resident can achieve the kind of ludicrous wealth and access to women that is realistically the sole province of the well-connected mulatto/foreigner inner circle through scheming, talent, and good looks.

Support for this interpretation of the meaning of 50 Cent's popularity among everyday Angolan youth can be found in an incident in Luanda in early May 2008. 50 Cent was performing a show in Luanda when he was interrupted by a young man who "jumped onstage and snatched 50 Cent's neck chain."<sup>48</sup> The young man who stole his neck chain may well have simply been trying to acquire a lucrative item for resale. However, the prominence of the neck chain in the self-representation of many American rap artists, including 50 Cent, and the obvious unlikelihood of the thief's success, make this attempt a vivid moment in which an Angolan reduces 50 Cent and his importance to one symbol of fabulous material wealth. The Angolan thief was as unsuccessful as the overwhelming majority of young men throughout the African diaspora who aspire to success through music, athletics, or crime. If most who aspire to material success through these means do not succeed, it does not mean that such an attempt is meaningless, particularly in a land where even most "legitimate" money is rooted in one sort of thievery or another. This man's attempt to steal 50 Cent's neck chain symbolically equalizes petty street theft, global capital, and political and economic power in Angola. If 50 Cent acquired his money through hustling and pimping, so did the Angolan state, and so, too, can this everyday Angolan man.

## Conclusion

The commodification of black bodies that is at the root of the formation of the African diaspora continues to inform the shape of the cultural exchanges within it. However, notwithstanding this chilling view of the wealth generated by the capitalist appropriation of hip-hop, it is possible to view the adoption of symbols and vernacular generated within the racial milieu of America as a powerful tool for resisting dominant narratives of *angolanidade*. Given the seemingly interminable power of the MPLA, who declare ownership of the production of the idea of *angolanidade* as the realm of their own *assimilados* and mulattos, it is a matter of necessity for everyday Angolans to form their own oppositional identities. By defining those in power

as fundamentally Other—as mulatto and/or foreign—everyday Angolans claim ownership over their own views of self, if not the realms of money and power within the nation. Connecting *angolanidade* to the global symbols of virile black masculinity, these Angolans implicitly demasculinize and delegitimize their own government. This notion of *angolanidade* directly contradicts lusotropicalist ideas that black masculinity is moribund and insignificant to the formation of the state; combating the lusotropicalist silence on black and mulatto masculinity, this vision builds on the historical relationship of the two identities within Angola and vigorously voices an explicitly black and Angolan perspective. At the same time, the Luandan fandom of 50 Cent illustrates the continued connections between wealth, masculinity, and the acquisition of lusotropically defined attractive women in the minds of the same men who are highly unlikely to ever have access to either wealth or power. Is this false consciousness, or does it rather pose the question of what kinds of oppositional narratives everyday Angolan women create through popular culture?

There is by no means a unified definition of *angolanidade* with enough widespread support to prompt organized political action capable of dealing with and overcoming the kinds of violent reprisals that the Angolan government is famous for using against dissenters. Cultural work and everyday chatter alone are not enough to change regimes, to bring justice, and some semblance of a tolerable standard of living to the *povo angolano*. At the same time, cultural production and popular participation remain key components of forging a consciousness that stands a chance of challenging the current regime. Without a satisfying political plan of my own, I close with the words of exiled Angolan rap artist Xumane who in the most direct condemnation of all promises that “the dictatorship is weakening” and impugns President José Eduardo dos Santos for producing “so much spilled blood,” arguing in the chorus that “Zédu [a nickname for Dos Santos] has to die for the people to survive.”<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

1. All translations in this article are my own. I would like to thank Gary Kemp and Nicole Eggers for their help in preparing this chapter, as well as Marissa Moorman for her considerable and ongoing advice and feedback. I would also like to thank the staff of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. David Birmingham, *Empire in Africa: Angola and Its Neighbors* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 161. For details of the events of 1977 and their continued repercussions for political culture in Angola, see Lara

Pawson, “The 27 May in Angola: A View from Below,” *Revista Relações Internacionais*, Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, June 2007.

2. Angola, formally independent from Portugal since 1975, held its first election in 1992 after the Bicesse Accords of 1991 brought about a brief halt in the conflict, ongoing since independence, between the now ruling party, the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola—the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola—National Union for the Complete Independence of Angola). There were many issues with fraud in this first election, including the disappearance of over a million ballots. The conflict recommenced with “a brutal crackdown on the UNITA leadership, and the MPLA’s *Jovem Justicheiros* carried out the ‘Halloween Massacre’ of UNITA supporters in Luanda.” After a brief attempt at a unity government in 1997–8 following the Lusaka Accords, the nation returned to war, and it only ended in February of 2002 following the killing of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi. The next legislative election following 1992 was eventually held on September 5, 2008. The landslide victory of the MPLA followed a campaign of intimidation, political assassination, massive irregularities—including paying Congolese citizens to come in and vote—and the failure of hundreds of polling stations in Luanda to open. See Paula Cristina Roque, “Angolan Legislative Elections: Analyzing the MPLA’s triumph,” *Institute for Securities Studies Situation Report*, September 16, 2008.
3. The term *musseque* dates to the colonial era, when it referred to the areas of Luanda reserved for African habitation. Now, in the postcolonial period, Luanda residents usually use *musseque* to refer to areas of concentrated poverty and few services within the city, in much the same way that an English speaker would say *slum* or *shantytown*.
4. Marissa Moorman, “‘Feel Angolan with this Music’: A Social History of Music and Nation, Luanda, Angola, 1945–1975” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2004), 14.
5. *Assimilados* refers to the caste of Africans who were recognized as assimilated and civilized by the Portuguese colonial regime and thus accorded civil rights, including exemption from forced labor. This classification was abolished only in 1961 after the widespread initiation of the Angolan armed struggle for independence.
6. The term *mulatto/a*, used to refer to a person with one white and one black parent, has its roots in the offensive comparison of such a person to a mule. I use the term throughout this chapter with a full awareness of this problematic etymology, not only because it is the term used most commonly on the streets of Luanda, but also because I think it usefully evokes the problematic nature of racial history throughout the black Atlantic.
7. Notable exceptions to the hegemonic narrative of Angolan nationalism include Aurora de Fonseca Ferreira’s doctoral dissertation on the history of Kisama, which argues that earlier influences by rural elite Africans were central to the emergence of an Angolan nationalism; Rosa Cruz e Silva’s article detailing a late nineteenth-century Luandan formation of Angolan

nationalism by elite intellectuals and writers—a thesis expanded into book form by Jacopo Corrado; and Marissa Moorman’s book that illuminates how popular music was instrumental in forging a working Angolan nationalism in Luanda in the mid-twentieth century. See Aurora da Fonseca Ferreira, “La Kisama (en Angola) du XVIIe au début du XXe siècle: autonomie, Occupation, et Résistance” (PhD diss., Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2000); Rosa Silva e Cruz, “O nacionalismo angolano: um projecto em construção no século XIX? Através de três periódicos da época: *O Pharol*, *O Tomate*, e *O Desastre*,” in *Construindo o passado angolano, as fontes e as sua interpretação—actas do II seminário internacional sobre a história de Angola* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional Para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 2000); Jacopo Corrado, *The Creole Elite and the Rise of Angolan Protonationalism, 1870–1920* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008); and Moorman, *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), based on the previously cited dissertation. As Moorman also notes, scholars of literature have written work that focuses on the cultural formation of Angolan nationalism, which has been largely neglected by historians.

8. Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande e senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal*, ed. Fernando Henrique Cardoso (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2004 [1933]).
9. For a discussion of a similar process in Cuba, for example, see Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
10. See, for example, Gerald Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese: The Myth and the Reality* (London: Heinemann: 1978), xx.
11. Corrado, *The Creole Elite and the Rise of Angolan Protonationalism*, 59.
12. Gilberto Freyre, *Aventura e rotina: sugestões de uma viagem à procura das constantes portuguesas de caráter e ação* (Rio de Janeiro: J. Olympio, 1953).
13. Rémy Lucas, “Aventura e rotina: Gilberto Freyre et l’Afrique,” *Lusotopie* (1997): 242.
14. Bender, *Angola Under the Portuguese*, 32.
15. Angola Xyami Forum, September 27, 2008, <http://forum.angolaxyami.com/poucas-palavras-bastam/121-angola-e-governada-por-mulatos-mas-foi-destruida-pelos-negros-e-verdade-ou-mentira.html>.
16. Assis Malaquias, “Ethnicity and Conflict in Angola: Prospects for Reconciliation,” in *Angola’s War Economy*, ed. Jakkie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2000), 107.
17. “BaKongo” refers to a member of the Kongo ethnic group, who identify as descendants of the Kingdom of Kongo.
18. William Jonet, “Dança de escala na Taag,” *Folha 8*, January 3, 1997, 5.
19. “Trabalhadores ameaçam greve,” *Folha 8*, January 14, 1997.
20. The official state narrative declares that Dos Santos’ parents were Sãotomean descendants of Angolan indentured laborers on the island, but that Dos Santos himself was born in Luanda. Many critics of the regime, both from

- UNITA and from without, claim that Dos Santos himself was born in São Tomé. Malaquias, "Ethnicity and Conflict in Angola," 107.
21. Manikongo Afonso I to King João III, 6 July 1526, cited in Antonio Brásio, *Monumenta Missionaria Africana: Africa Ocidental*, 10 vols. (Lisboa: Agência Geral do Ultramar Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1962), vol. 1, 294–323. While Afonso does not call the traders Tomista by name, it was the slaving interests from the island who were directing the trade at that period.
  22. Joseph Miller, "Central Africa During the Era of the Slave Trade, c. 1490s–1850s," in *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*, ed. Linda Heywood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23–4.
  23. Flávio Gomes and Roquinaldo Ferreira, "A miragem da miscigenação," *Novos Estudos* 80 (2008): 152.
  24. António de Oliveira de Cadornega, *História geral das guerras angolanas* (Lisbon: Agência-Geral das Colónias, Divisão de Publicações e Biblioteca, 1940–2), v. 3, 29–30.
  25. Gomes and Ferreira, "A miragem da miscigenação," 153. As always, the terms of identity should be called into question. Were these people classified as mulattoes *because* they were Brazilian? Jacopo Corrado cites a case of a *degradado* sent to Angola from Minas Gerais in 1810, who was described in his obituary as black, raising the possibility of a higher degree of complexity in identities of the Brazilian *degradados*. Corrado, *The Creole Elite and the Rise of Angolan Protonationalism*, 84.
  26. Gomes and Ferreira, "A miragem da miscigenação," 153.
  27. Joseph Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 251.
  28. *Ibid.*, 248.
  29. *Ibid.*
  30. Júlio de Castro Lopo, *Uma rica dona de Luanda* (Porto: Industrial Gráfica, 1948), 8–9.
  31. Corrado, *The Creole Elite and the Rise of Angolan Protonationalism*, 159–61.
  32. On the streets of Luanda, it is common to hear someone ask the leading question, "What national language does Zédu speak?" The listener is assumed to understand that he does not speak any of them.
  33. Corrado, *The Creole Elite and the Rise of Angolan Protonationalism*, xiv.
  34. United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report 2009, Angola, [http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_AGO.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_AGO.html)
  35. The last complete census was undertaken by the Portuguese in 1970, five years prior to independence; many Angolans avoided being counted for fear of being detained by the colonial government. Since that time, three decades of war and massive dislocation and migration have undoubtedly radically altered even the incomplete picture available from the 1970 census. See "Angola Promises First Census Since 1970 by 2010," *African Center for Statistics*, December 7, 2006, [http://www.uneca.org/STATISTICS/News\\_Angola\\_census.htm](http://www.uneca.org/STATISTICS/News_Angola_census.htm).

36. In the summer of 2007, rumors abounded in Luanda of rural people fleeing “into the bush” in order to avoid being registered. This strategy was used by Angolans to avoid both forced labor during the twentieth-century colonial regime and enslavement in earlier times.
37. For an excellent contextualization and analysis of Dog Murras’ work, see Marissa Moorman, “‘Estámos sempre a subir:’ Kúduro Music in Angola and Portugal,” Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD) Conference, University of Notre Dame “Africa in Portuguese, the Portuguese in Africa,” 18–19 April 2008, <http://kellogg.nd.edu/projects/FLAD/pdfs/Moorman,%20Marissa.pdf>.
38. Greg Tate, “Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects,” in *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking From Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 7.
39. While these were not the only ads promoting voter registration, they were the only ones I saw during the summer of 2007 that featured a celebrity.
40. Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Kirby, and Jared Sagoff, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) Fact Sheet, July 2005, [http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS\\_Youth\\_Voting\\_72-04.pdf](http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_Youth_Voting_72-04.pdf).
41. “RNA nega censura a Dog Murras,” *Seminário Angolense*, January 29, 2008 on [http://www.angonoticias.com/full\\_headlines.php?id=18105](http://www.angonoticias.com/full_headlines.php?id=18105).
42. Dog Murras, “Angola Bwé de Caras.”
43. Tchizé dos Santos, “Tchizé dos Santos lança forte apelo à tolerância na sociedade angolana,” *Seminário Angolense* in *Notícias Lusófonas*, February 3, 2008, <http://www.noticiaslusofonas.com/view.php?load=arcview&article=20482&catogory=Brasil>.
44. “Detidos sete agentes da polícia suspeitos de massacre do Sambizanga,” *AngoNoticias*, August 29, 2008, [http://www.angonoticias.com/full\\_headlines.php?id=20780](http://www.angonoticias.com/full_headlines.php?id=20780).
45. Accounts of this brutal murder were common on the streets of Luanda even in the summer of 2007. For a journalistic account in English, see Rafael Marques, “When the People’s Silence Speaks,” *Pambazuka News*, February 26, 2004.
46. Mc K, “A Técnica, as Kausas e as Konsekuências.”
47. 50 Cent, “P.I.M.P (Remix),” *Get Rich or Die Trying* (Aftermath/Shady/Interscope Records: 2003), dir. by Chris Robinson.
48. Lawrence Van Gelder, “50 Cent Show Disrupted in Angola,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2008.
49. Xumane, “Zédu tem que morrer.”

## Quenching the Thirst for Data: Beer, Local Connections, and Fieldwork in Ghana

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“The memory does not work well with a dry throat” I was disappointed, the first time I heard this statement. To my ears, it signaled that once again I had arranged a meeting with a research informant who would add little of value to my project. But I had not listened well and had misread his meaning. Still I bought us both two large Star beers. It was November 2001; we sat in Back Home Spot, a large outdoor drinking establishment in Saboba, a small, dusty town in northern Ghana nestled on the Togolese border.

I traveled alone during my fieldwork. Large state-operated buses carried me from Accra and Kumasi to Tamale, the administrative capital of the Northern Region. From there, I squeezed into smaller, third-hand Mercedes Benz buses for a three-, sometimes four-, hour ride along dusty, bumpy unpaved roads to Yendi, Nakpanduri, Saboba, Wapuli, and other northern towns and villages. These are quiet, intimate places, where the sounds of goats, chickens, and guinea fowl dominate and dust accompanies you everywhere. The southerly harmattan winds from the Sahara desert far to the north blow the dust through the air, into your face and onto everything around you. Even in an enclosed vehicle, it is difficult to arrive at your destination without a perfect, full-body dust coating. Most often, when I arrived for the first time in these small northern towns and villages I had little more than the name of a man who would not be expecting me but would, I was invariably assured, be helpful.

Rather than wander these villages and towns, my first stop, if I lacked a precise destination, was the nearest—or only, as was likely the case—drinking spot. I would sit in the open and drink a beer or a mineral (soda). Sitting and drinking in this way made it easy for people to approach me and for me to approach others. Drinking spots also allowed me to operate in these small towns for extended periods and maintain some semblance of independence and autonomy. Rural hospitality fosters a friendly competition among families to be the one to “host/take care of” foreign strangers, which most often includes preparing meals and facilitating the visitor’s movement in and around town. There is immense joy in forming intimate bonds with new friends, but the nature of field research in such environments demands a level of control over one’s time and mobility. Above all else, sitting and drinking beer or sharing a meal with someone is among the most human of interactions. I understood this well when I began my project, but I had not anticipated that beer and food would transform my research methodology and provide a new perspective and ultimately insight into my relationship with communities in which I conduct research.

During my early field research in 2000 and 2001 on Konkomba’s social and political history, Saboba served as my base of operation outside of the archives, and Back Home Spot was something of an office. For my numerous sojourns in and around Saboba, each morning Back Home Spot was my first stop before any appointment. I then paid it at least two or three more visits throughout the day, including a final stop before I adjourned for the day. Back Home Spot connected me to people in the town, and made it possible for them to know where I was—or had planned to be—at any given time and what I was doing. It was also where I acquired my understanding and appreciation for leisure in fieldwork; where I learned that sitting and waiting, and sitting and listening are part of an authenticating process that humanizes the researcher and his or her hosts.

Drinking spots served as a critical element in my approach to fieldwork from a process of collecting data to one of building relationships to develop a deeper understanding about human lives and experiences in particular contexts. Beer, minerals, and even kenkey and fish, or any dish for that matter, shared in conversation educes particular forms of knowledge conveyed with greater richness and detail than if one sits in a living room and poses preset questions and waits to capture the responses on a recorder. Food and drink foster drawn out

responses, and fuller, more dynamic interactions and exchanges, and, therefore, more thoughtful questions.

I learned this unwittingly, after my companion's first sips of his Star. I had given up all hope of a fruitful interview. Still, we talked for about a half hour about "things," but soon we were trekking deep into the details of his experiences at Yendi Middle School during the 1950s. This was precisely the information I had hoped for when I tracked him down. I nonchalantly turned my recorder on and we continued to talk for almost two hours. A well-moistened throat does indeed recharge the memory. Our conversation that day was the first of two that we would have during my time in Ghana that year; the next built upon the previous one and accompanied by beer and casual asides, and tangents about "things."

I met the request to water or feed a memory in various forms during my fieldwork in northern Ghana, until 2005 when I completed my research. My willingness, indeed fondness, for sitting and drinking beer or eating a local dish with those from whom I sought historical narratives and memories, I believe, authenticated me, and the relaxed, informal atmosphere provided an entrée to rich oral research. Getting to know these human sources as individuals and allowing them to get to know me improved the research project. I use authentic, not in the sense that I "belonged" as an insider belongs, but, rather, as one who community members defined through his actions and professed intentions rather than their preconceived notions of how someone like him "is." I was a real person, not simply a label or category—American, student, foreigner, although these helped describe me. To seek authentication through a convincing explication of the value of my research project or proselytizing on racial politics would take time and did not guarantee success. In fact, this tactic would certainly have failed. Shared interests—in this case beer and food—brought me and my research informants together in immediate mutual understanding, and on neutral terrain—the drinking spot. Beer, mutual interest, and a sense of equality lubricated the conversations.

Once drinking spots were embedded in my fieldwork methodology I made liberal use of them throughout Ghana. Fortunately, there is a drinking spot in every village, town, and urban neighborhood in the country. In each new locale that I entered, my eyes scanned every manmade structure for the standard blue, or occasionally red, wooden Coca-Cola sign that bore the name of my destination: "Comfort Spot," "Grace's," "Bubbles," "Come and Sit!," and other beacons to the parched. There are few better places anywhere in the

world to make new friends and get a sense of prevailing social and political issues. But Back Home Spot in Saboba was my drinking spot of choice.<sup>1</sup> There were at least two other drinking establishments and quite a few informal “pito houses” in Saboba.<sup>2</sup> But Back Home Spot was ideally situated and laid out. With its plentiful white plastic chairs and tables, each with its own large umbrella bearing the Club Beer logo, it gave me an unobstructed view of one of the main roads that led to Saboba’s market, perfect for seeing and being seen. At the time, it was the most popular evening gathering place for Saboba’s educated elite to talk politics and football.

My goal here in telling of my relationship with beer and Ghana’s drinking spots is more than to extol the virtues of leisure as a core component of one’s research methodology. I present the benefits of building genuine, human relationships with research informants, and advocate that researchers embrace community-specific research strategies and methodologies that begin with fully acknowledging and accounting for his or her conceptions of the social categories of race, class, and gender. It is critical that researchers remain cognizant of the discursive aspect of fieldwork, in the sense that it produces rather than simply reflects what we are researching.<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork is entangled with wider social and historical relations, and involves the ideological construction of the subject of its enquiry.<sup>4</sup> Social blindness and political disinterest are not prerequisites for objective research, yet, as James Clifford and George Marcus argue, “The discourse of the cultural analyst can no longer be simply that of the ‘experienced observer,’ describing and interpreting custom” and, in my case, history.<sup>5</sup> Objectivity calls for a confession of racial, political, and historical biases, to truly be hyperconscious of them. If one conducts research blind to his or her biases and confident in his or her own inherent objectivity, one may not recognize the influence of preconceptions and prejudices on the research and writing. Most of all, through my discussion of research strategies and experiences, I seek to undermine common constructions of the researcher-subject binary. Although the written work produced from fieldwork customarily positions the researcher as empowered over data and the analysis of it, it is most common for research subjects and host communities to exercise considerable control over both the researcher and the data that he or she seeks.

Like all of northern Ghana, Saboba is dry and hot. Lotion and lip balm are standard issue, and I applied both liberally, as did everyone else. Northern towns are not crowded and bustling like their

counterparts in the Akan-dominated south. They are quiet and less densely populated. Farmers with a hoe hanging from their shoulders riding Chinese-made bicycles to their distant farms are a more common site on the roads than traders and trucks hauling commercial goods. By their own reckoning and evident physical and material state, northerners are in general far poorer and underserved by the government than their southern countrymen.

Konkomba society remained politically marginalized in the region until the 1970s, although they are second in population within northern Ghana to the politically dominant Dagomba. Konkomba are a historically noncentralized, or chiefless society, best known for the central role of its members in the ethnic-based political violence of 1981 and 1994, the largest ethnic conflicts in Ghana's history. These two episodes left thousands dead and many more displaced, and unhinged Ghanaians' sense of immunity to the plague of ethnic violence that afflicted most of its neighbors in the West African subregion. My research focus was the communal politics of the colonial and early postcolonial periods that set the stage for these conflicts and broader, more varied relations around power, tradition, and belonging within and between northern communities. These relations and the subsequent violence were shaped directly by British colonial rule and its legacies in the region, and the social and political inequities they fostered. To counter these inequities, Konkomba political and business leaders promoted dramatic social and political change, which was dissonant with the Konkomba's traditional status that the government and neighboring communities ascribed to them.

My research was only possible through numerous trips of varying lengths to Saboba and neighboring villages. There are considerable distances between Konkomba villages and hamlets in this region of hilly plains, with thin tree covering and low-lying bushes. Without a car, it was difficult for me to move between these communities to socialize, conduct oral research, and generally explore Konkomba society. I was forced to rely upon a number of friends and acquaintances for contacts, transportation—usually a motorcycle or bicycle—and background information on villages, individuals, and cultural and social practices. Drinking spots were essential to my success in forming these relationships, which were built upon mutual interests, including the success of my research as it unfolded.

Becoming a drinking spot connoisseur was one of a host of research strategies that I employed to navigate the personal aspects of fieldwork over which I had only limited control, but for which navigating was

critical to gaining access to the information at the heart of my project. Other, equally important, strategies included avoiding discussions of race—despite the fact that my own long-held notions of race were the source of my original interest in Africa—and, similarly, allowing my research “hosts/subjects” to define themselves and their history on their own terms. Both of these strategies called for me to remain intensely aware of the preconceived ideas that I brought with me.

For me and a growing number of social historians, field research outside of archives—such as conducting formal and informal oral interviews/conversations, observing communal events, and analyzing artifacts and historic sites maintained within local communities—is central to reconstructing and analyzing local histories. These local histories, as I argue, are critical to understand the nature of social and political change, and the forces that shape them, on national and regional levels. Clearly articulated strategies for navigating the more personal aspect of field research has the potential to produce scholarship that reflects the experiences of the people, issues, and events at the heart of their study rather than the scholar’s preconceived notions and agendas.

To consult archived documents to reconstruct historical events and capture historical experiences is a more straightforward process than conducting oral interviews. In the Ghana National Archives in Accra and the Regional Archives in Tamale, I was thrilled to find a robust collection of documents pertaining to Konkomba during the colonial and early postcolonial periods. Yet, British colonial officials produced all but a scant few of the documents for the British colonial administration. While these were invaluable to my project, my research agenda emphasized local perspectives and experiences. Therefore, I had to glean some sense of these from the colonial documents. But to present a fuller reconstruction of local colonial experiences, present-day perceptions of them, and their political significance I had to travel to the villages and towns of northern Ghana and interface with living, human sources, and explore historic sites. As I described above, my objective in the encounters and relationships that I developed during this village-level and highly interactive stage of my research was to divorce my prejudices from the experiences and data that I gathered along the way.

I maintained a strong emotional connection to the country through its history of Pan-Africanism and existing landmarks of the Atlantic slave trade. So, in many respects, I began my research equipped with a strong sense of Ghana’s history as linked with my own. Yet during

my fieldwork, I was conscious of the fact that I embraced the people of the community, of Ghana generally, for their “blackness,” culture, and history. I was equally conscious that few of them expressed an affinity with me based on a shared “blackness” alone. Negotiating interactions around “who I am” and who my “hosts/subjects are” was in many respects as critical to my research outcomes as the information that I gathered through formal and informal research conversations with political leaders, current and former school teachers, village elders, and chiefs.

I depended almost entirely on my hosts for assistance in navigating their social, cultural, and political environment. I did not operate with researcher’s privilege. As much as I studied and interpreted the people and their history, they studied and interpreted me in ways that were beyond my control. For me and my immediate hosts to build a meaningful relationship and proceed to dig beneath the surface and the pitfalls of stereotype, romance, and self-interest and truly begin to learn about each other I had to silence my notions of race and diasporic connectedness. My concern was not only with the information that I gathered but how I gathered it, and the ways in which the process shaped the nature of the data for me and my informants. My research took a dialogic approach, in this sense, which involved interrogating my “subjects” and, in turn, allowing myself to be interrogated by them.<sup>6</sup>

“Culture,” therefore, is always relational, “an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power,” Caroline Brettel argues.<sup>7</sup> This approach acknowledges that the encounter involves prior interpretations on everyone’s part. Although my analysis of research into Konkomba society was not explicitly about race, what I gleaned from my research experiences contributes to undermining “race” and ethnicity as what Yasmin Gunaratnam labels “neutral, unitary and ahistorical categories.”<sup>8</sup> The project raised issues of my own position of power/powerlessness among my Konkomba associates.

Notwithstanding my initial dependence, the people of Saboba were far more conscious than me of my position of power within the community, and how they might benefit from it. I recognized my relative material advantages but did not regard myself as wealthy, so it did not consciously shape the ways in which I interacted with the people in these communities. For my hosts my American-ness—which really referenced my relative wealth and my foreign-ness—and eagerness to engage in their daily routines and learn specific aspects of their

history set me apart and made me relevant. I recognized their interest in my American-ness and to a lesser extent my African American-ness, at least as they conceived of them. Although my connections to Africa, and Ghana in particular, were intellectual, historical, and emotional, with few exceptions, I silenced these connections to make way for this organic connection to evolve between me and the host community, even though I was uncomfortable with “wealth” as a distinctive marker of my identity for them. I remained silent on issues related to race, even when my research brought to the fore issues directly linked to popular notions of race in the United States. Slavery and its legacy emerged as a critical area of inquiry for me only after I began my research, but quickly took shape as an invaluable piece of the project. Konkomba leaderships’ articulation or disarticulation of the Konkomba slave experiences provided a platform to position their historical memory in general and popular perceptions of slavery and its intersection with current politics in particular. To fully explore these issues, it was imperative that I divorce my own preconceptions of the deep meaning of slavery and its legacy in Ghana and its links to my own history and identity.

On one occasion, at Back Home Spot, I conversed with a retired government clerk, an elder Konkomba, who explained the reasons that Konkomba could never have been victims of the local slave trade. He supported his claim with a description of the typical Konkomba hamlet, which, as he explained, would have presented an insurmountable challenge for would-be slave raiders. Konkomba have tended to organize small, widely dispersed hamlets considerable distances from roads. By the time raiders attacked one compound, let alone a hamlet, the inhabitants would have escaped into the bush.<sup>9</sup> In fact, he argued, contrary to outsiders targeting Konkomba for the slave trade, as many of their neighbors claimed, during years of lean harvests Konkomba—well respected as hardworking and productive farmers—obtained slaves and pawns from their neighbors.

We had not started off discussing slavery or the slave trade, but this is where the conversation landed. I certainly did not mind. It is always exciting when a research conversation drifts into uncharted waters. In this case, a discussion of precolonial Konkomba relationships with neighboring ethnic communities had taken a natural and fortunate turn to slavery, a subject rarely spoken of publicly, and mostly in hushed tones.

For me, this was all great information, which opened the door to conduct additional conversations among Konkomba political leaders

to gauge the popular historical memory of slavery and the slave trade and its political currency among Konkomba and within northern Ghana in general. I had not begun the conversation anticipating a primer on the slave trade in northern Ghana and it certainly provided insight into Konkomba perceptions of history and its social and political value. Between 1898 and 1957, British colonial officials used the legacies of precolonial enslavement and conquest in the region to justify their construction of an ethnic-based—they referred to them as tribes—political hierarchy for local control, which postcolonial regimes did little to dismantle.

After we finished our discussion and my companion departed, another Konkomba man, who sat close by listening to our conversation, came to my table. He was an elder who I knew but with whom I had never had a formal conversation. This gentleman had always greeted me with a warm smile, but on this occasion, beneath his usual dignified air, he was seething. He sat down and politely suggested that I buy him a beer so that he could tell me the truth about Konkomba and the slave trade. As I watched the elder fill his glass with Star beer, I felt disappointed for having allowed someone to eavesdrop on a research conversation. Usually, I am very careful to speak softly and directly to the person with whom I converse so as to render the content of my conversation unintelligible to those sitting around us. This man had heard my previous conversation and concluded that I had been gravely misinformed. Much of my oral research concerned recent events that involved individuals that remained socially active. There were, therefore, potential dangers of others not directly involved in the conversation misconstruing, or even overhearing, my conversations.

Between slow sips on his beer, my new companion let loose the “real” Konkomba history as if he had rehearsed it all morning, which he prefaced with ire toward what he called “power hungry Konkomba leaders” who spend all of their time in Accra (Ghana’s capital) while they claimed to represent the interests of Konkomba farmers in the north. He insisted that the man with whom I had previously been speaking did not want to tell the truth about slavery, because of the disadvantages associated with a slave heritage. This man’s long torso leaned over the table as he spoke, in a slightly overbearing, aggressive manner. But he spoke persuasively. Yet, the evidence that I would gather over the next two years, both oral and archival, painted a more complex picture. In addition to reconstructing the history of Konkomba involvement in the regional slave trade,

for me the critical issue would become the ways in which political leaders employed this history and popular memories of it to advance social and political interests and define power in the region. Here was evidence—however scant—that historical memory was hotly contested between societies and among at least some Konkomba leaders in Saboba.

Historical texts that referenced Konkomba cited them as targeted by the kingdom of Dagbon for slaves to be sent to Asante between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The legacy of slavery and their noncentralized political status marked Konkomba as politically marginalized within traditional politics in Ghana. The rigorous denial among Konkomba leaders that Konkomba served as a significant source of Dagomba slaves illuminated the power of history and local constructions and assertions of it in contemporary local politics.

For Konkomba, slavery undermined any claims to land and political legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> This debate is rooted in neighboring Dagomba chiefs' claims to British colonial officials during the early years of British rule in the region that they and other centralized polities enslaved Konkomba and sold them to Asante and the coast. Similar to Dagomba claims to have conquered and ruled Konkomba, enslavement connoted Konkomba's political illegitimacy and weakness. British officials took for granted that as rulers Dagomba would also have traded Konkomba slaves. However, there is no substantial evidence of large-scale raids among Konkomba villages by outside groups.<sup>11</sup> For the British, historical evidence lay in political structures and assertions of tradition and custom. The ways in which politically dominant communities and the government asserted slavery as a tool to cast noncentralized societies as politically illegitimate illustrates the legacy of slavery's political currency. During the colonial period, the descendants of putative and real slave raiders acquired a higher political stock than the descendants of the raided. There was, therefore, an incentive for communities to disassociate from a history of enslavement, real or otherwise. It is likely that some Konkomba were victims of slave raids, yet the question remains whether Dagomba systematically raided Konkomba villages and hamlets and, if so, on what grounds did such a history translate into forms of colonial power?

Konkomba, the man continued, had most definitely been targeted and sold south as slaves. Not just to the kingdom of Asante but to the Americas, "where they worked in cotton fields singing 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot.'"

“Yes,” I said, nodding, “I am familiar with this history and that song.” My first instinct was to say, “Yes, that’s me! You’re talking about my people. Perhaps there are descendants of Konkomba among my friends, among my family!” Instead, I nodded to convey I understood. I allowed him to speak freely, only interrupting when I needed him to clarify a particular point. During such research conversations I make an effort to pose as few staged and preconceived questions as possible. Certainly, the conversation must have direction and purpose, but I work hard to build on the speakers’ own statements. The goal is to allow local retellings, perceptions, or feelings on a particular historical moment, subject, or individual to drive the conversations in a free, unencumbered fashion. In other words, to the extent possible, I avoid pushing the speaker based upon my own prefabricated notions or goals. I relish tangents and offer my own, to maintain a sense of informality and genuine exchange, and keep an open door for the unexpected. This is part of my larger effort to ensure that my research is not about me, beyond it being drafted and shaped by my own tenacious interest in it and general intellectual curiosity. But, at that moment, I could not help but wonder with whom this man believed he was speaking. What were his assumptions about who I was? Who was I in his eyes and what was my story? I refrained from asking him.

I had a number of opportunities to try to build connections around notions of race. Few white people—or non-Ghanaians of any sort, for that matter—passed through Saboba. When they did it was noteworthy. An exception was the residents of the Assemblies of God Mission. Since the late 1940s, white American missionaries, often with families, have maintained a medical clinic and spacious house in Saboba near the chief’s village, not far from the main road. When I was in Saboba in spring 2005, a middle-aged American couple ran the mission station and clinic. I had questions about the first missionary family in Saboba—the McNutts—and had been told that this couple knew the McNutts’ daughter who had lived in Saboba with the family in 1947.

One late afternoon, I ventured with Ishmael, a local teenager who at times served as my assistant, guide, or general helper, toward the Assemblies of God Mission house, which, at the time, remained the only multiroomed, Western-style house in Saboba. Within seconds of knocking on the front door, a man’s voice came through an open window, “To the back! Never from the front! Go to the back door! How many times do I have to say not to come to the front?” Ishmael shot

me a concerned look. He seemed to be on the verge of apologizing. "He is always like this," he said. "He is an odd man." My first instinct was to turn and walk away. I could not imagine obeying a command that I use the back door of any place, let alone an American's house in Africa. Yet, in times such as this, too much personal reflection and pride could result in a permanently lost opportunity. In an instant, there I was walking up the few steps in the back of the house that led to a door, deliberating on which piece of my mind I should give this man. The door opened to expose a hostile look and a barrage of new insults from a pale, gray-bearded face. "How are you doing?" I shouted, before a new line of insults could further diminish my mood. "I met you several years ago," I quickly continued, "during one of my earlier trips to Saboba." He stood there silenced and clearly stunned, trying to adjust his senses to the palpable disconnect between my American accent and black face.

Well, that is what I assumed was going on in his head. I really have no way of knowing, other than the look on his face. The fact of the matter is my face was, and still is, not all that dark, at least by Saboba standards. Evidently, at first glance, this white American man in Africa was incapable of distinguishing between me, and my clearly different facial features and complexion, and the darker faces that he lived and worked with in Saboba. Shades of dark did not appear to compute. It seems that, for him, I was in this village, I was not white, therefore I was black—African—and a constant nuisance and, as he later explained, a source of thievery and deceit. After a moment, my accent and the words that it took form around penetrated, and his face softened dramatically. He did not become welcoming but was no longer hostile. I continued to talk as he invited Ishmael and me into his house, through the back door, and we made our way through a cluttered kitchen to the living room. It took a moment for my senses to adjust to the Western-ness of the space. The stacks of American magazines and books, the framed photographs on the tables, and the way the furniture was arranged was dissonant with the world outside. Seated on his couch, I reintroduced myself, and the man grew warmer, more talkative. After a few minutes he was something akin to friendly, as we talked about New York, California, and Saboba's "thieves."

He labeled the town's "Africans," as he generically referred to them, with characteristics that were as incompatible with my experience as his house was with its surroundings. But I was not there to challenge his views. To judge from the strength of emotion behind his

positions as he expressed them, my attempts to rebuke him for such broad brush racist generalizations would certainly result in locked horns and the failure of my mission. “You’re the first black American that I’ve met who’s not here searching for his roots,” he said, visibly pleased with his find. What is the best response to such a statement? I chose to move the conversation to a new subject, the McNutts, and soon accomplished my purpose in visiting this house.

The man and his wife walked Ishmael and me out of the front door, but before we could make our way down the darkened path to the main road, the couple grabbed one of my and Ishmael’s hands to form an impromptu prayer circle and issued a fervent plea for my safe journey and the success of my research. To my surprise, I was touched. Still, as Ishmael and I walked toward Back Home Spot, I prepared a short speech in my mind about American racism. This was an opportunity for me to make my racial case to Ishmael that in the eyes of far too many white folks, black people are all the same, and we are bound to each other by their racism. But doing so would only assert the Western construction of race and further demonstrate that I am not, in fact, one of “us” but clearly, as evidenced by my racialized outlook, one of “them.” Speaking on the evening’s event from a racial perspective would also betray my ambition to make my research and the relationships forged in the process of conducting it devoid of any aspect of my own identity politics. We had already built a bond around my research, my willingness to allow him to accompany me during my day-trips, and his genuine interest in me as an outsider. So instead of forcing my race-based connection, I embraced our experience as a joint insult. It was not the basis of the insult that was important but that we were insulted at all, and that we had responded with kindness.

Beer, food, and interest in Konkomba history and culture deepened my relationship with community members. My take on race and racial politics, I was certain, would confound them and undermine our common ground. I was convinced of this and on occasion took it too far. I allowed myself to be temporarily hobbled by my pride that my friends in Saboba regarded me as someone who ate and drank like a “Ghanaian.” Yet, “everything in moderation” is certainly an adage that serves the traveler well. But to decline an offer carries consequences. My desire to avoid insulting a friend or host in Saboba and, perhaps, an overly zealous ambition to demonstrate that I can go with the flow, at times left me in less than comfortable situations.

Aware of my fondness and willingness to sit and drink beer and have casual conversations at all hours, my friends usually served me a beer soon after I arrived at their houses. Pito was another matter entirely. This local, home-brewed beer is certainly an acquired taste, but as it is a hospitality drink one has ample opportunity to adjust to it. Every weekend, particularly on Sundays, the pito drinking throughout northern Ghana is tremendous. Konkomba are well known for their pito and enjoy showing it off. Pito brewers serve it in small calabashes that are most often passed around and shared, but if you pay extra or are a guest you get your own full calabash. Unfortunately, I was always the guest and my calabash was never allowed to empty. No matter how furiously I drank it was refilled and refilled. When I sipped and drank slowly, the “visit” would stretch for hours. My ability to “manage” with pito increased my popularity, but also elevated the enthusiasm with which people offered pito to me and kept my calabash full. New Year’s Day 2001 was my undoing. Pito, so my memory tells me, was everywhere, including in a very large calabash between my hands. The next day, the sickness was not only in my head, but in my stomach and every limb, and lasted for three days.

By most accounts, it is easier to measure the return on time and effort invested in an archive. At the end of the day, the pages of notes in a legal pad and the pile of photocopied or scanned documents are a tangible testament to one’s progress and the success or limits of one’s research strategy. Particularly when working in less developed areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, fieldwork is most often more personal and physically demanding than archival research. This is not to suggest that conducting research in the archives of developing countries—and even in more developed regions and countries—does not often come with formidable challenges. Yet there are elements commonly built into the process of archival research—presenting one’s credentials, communication with an archivist prior to starting the research, requesting a list of documents—that marks one’s status and interests and, therefore, makes it less personal than fieldwork. A physical presence within the “subject space” provides a clearer sense of popular perceptions of past events and notions of their consequences for the present than archival documents could possibly provide. It also brings the researcher and the research subject closer together.

One’s presence at an archive indicates an obvious interest in conducting research on some aspect of the region or country’s history. By contrast, a researcher’s intentions are rarely self-evident when he or she arrives in a town to conduct oral interviews among a specific

demographic. They must be articulated in a way that is palatable and acceptable to would-be informants. Local residents make a range of assumptions with regard to a researcher's intentions, few, if any, of which are likely to have connections to scholarly research. However, in an archive, regardless of the ways in which its staff may identify you, "researcher"—perhaps qualified by British, American, or Nigerian—is foremost among them. The lack of such apparent, personal connections in the research field has bearing on the research process and product. Archivists and documents have the capacity to sway the direction of research, but "hosts/subjects" maintain a more poignant and at times intimate power over the nature and direction of one's field research.

Food and drink are, quite obviously, universal, and people around the world interact with them in fundamentally similar ways. Although the substance of food and drink may be superficially foreign, the social meanings behind them comprise a global language, which is why they are so widely used to start relationships, conversations, ceremonies, etc.<sup>12</sup> My research could not be mere extraction from the local communities. Its success was built on the relationships that I established. In rural communities relationships develop around reciprocated hospitality. My drinking spots, and general show of willingness to sit, eat and drink, were vital to forming the relationships that I desired, relationships in which I was not always the stranger, not always the guest, but could in fact serve as host. I did not always have to excuse myself from someone's home when I wanted to conclude the conversation. I did not have to stick to their schedule and pause while they pursued their domestic or vocational obligations. The white plastic tables and chairs under the colorful umbrellas at Back Home Spot provided a neutral space in which I could exercise greater control over the pace of our interaction. So, my affection for drinking spots and employing them as a central feature of my research strategy acknowledged the relative disempowerment that accompanied me into small towns and villages to conduct social research. It spoke to my recognition of myself in relation to my hosts and how they are likely to view me. Such self-awareness without self-centeredness is essential for well-rounded fieldwork in rural communities.

A drawback to my strategy to silence my identity politics was that members of the host community often interpreted me and their sense of the environment that I came from in ways that upset my sensibilities. My presence in Saboba spending time socially and conducting research conversations was a luxury that few Ghanaians, even

Ghanaian scholars, could afford. As such, my activities clearly set me apart. Nonetheless, I unobjectively utilized my material resources to assist those with whom I had formed a close bond. When one of my principal informants passed away, for example, I gave his wife some money. When one of my best friends in Saboba sought me out to invest in the expansion of his business, I did not hesitate to contribute. And there are other instances where I asserted my relative wealth, including paying people to “assist” me when I really did not need much assistance. On one hand, such behavior exacerbated the economic and therefore social differences between me and the members of the community in which I sought to create intimate relationships. It placed me in the category of the wealthy “white” stranger and, therefore, further removed from their society. The affinity that I would ideally have established along racial and political lines only benefited me, and that must not be the goal.

To study a people and their history, social historians must often live and work among them, and rely on them for sources, most often in the form of oral interviews, photographs, and an understanding of local contexts. Again, as historians develop clearer strategies for local-level fieldwork, it is critical to reflect upon and acknowledge one’s own preconceived ideas about the communities within the research site and one’s relationship to them prior to reconstructing any aspect their histories in the written word. Records examined in an archive, popular stereotypes, and one’s own background have powerful sway over the perspective that one brings to writing history. Failure to acknowledge the preconceived ideas with which one arrives in a town or village, or an individual’s house, for that matter, prevent the historian from limiting the extent to which these notions creep into the project and shape the examples we employ, the individuals we privilege, and the conclusions we draw. Determining how best to develop and navigate these relationships involve formulating strategies for addressing the socially unfamiliar. In this respect, research hosts hold a privileged, seldom acknowledged position that is central to the outcomes and success of one’s research.

## Notes

1. As of my most recent visit to Saboba in April 2006, Back Home Spot had undergone a change in name, ownership, and popularity.
2. Pito is a beer brewed from fermented sorghum and is widely produced throughout northern Ghana. For a detailed description of pito and its role in

- Konkomba society, see Zimon, Henryk, "The Guinea Corn Harvest Rituals Among the Konkomba of Northern Ghana," *Anthropos* 84 (1989), 447–458. On the history and social significance of alcohol in Ghana, see Emmuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (New York: Heinemann, 1996).
3. Yasmin Gunaratnum, *Researching "Race" and Ethnicity: Methods, Knowledge and Power* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 7.
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. James Clifford and George E. Marcus eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1986), 14.
  6. Caroline Brettel ed., *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 14.
  7. *Ibid.*, 15.
  8. Gunaratnum, *Researching "Race" and Ethnicity*, 19.
  9. I present a detailed history of Konkomba and the slave trade in Benjamin Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Ghana* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Chapter 1.
  10. On historical memory and slavery in Ghana, see Benjamin Talton "The Politics of Social Change;" and see also, Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
  11. Talton, *Politics of Social Change in Ghana*.
  12. For an alternative, non-African example of food, hospitality and reciprocity, see Tracey Heatherington, "In the Rustic Kitchen: Real Talk and Reciprocity," *Ethnology*, 40, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 329-343. For an example of the history of food and social patterns in Africa, see Elias Mandala, *The End of Chidyerano: A History of Food and Everyday Life in Malawi, 1860–2004* (New York: Praeger, 2005).

(African-)American Woman Outsider:  
Nationality, Race, and Gender in Field  
Research in Mozambique\*\*\*

*Frances Henderson*

In July 2003, after an exhausting 22-hour trip from St. Louis, I landed alone in the East African coastal city of Maputo, capital of Mozambique, to begin my dissertation research on women and women's organizations in the country since democratization in 1990. My "welcoming party" had not arrived, so I spent an hour talking to a young man I met who had returned home to Maputo from Brazil. It was a great opportunity to practice my Portuguese with someone who spoke English. Before I was aware, an hour had passed. We switched between Portuguese and English and he told me the "cool places to hang out and get a drink" in Maputo. I did not know the person who was scheduled to pick me up. I only knew that it was my in-country advisor's brother. While the young man and I continued our conversation, a man approached me and asked "Are you Frances?" With a sigh of relief that my welcoming party had arrived, I said that I was. He replied, "I was here all of the time and I did not realize that you were here until I heard you speaking English with this young man. I did not recognize you; we thought you would be white."

Stunned but too tired from the trip to say much in Portuguese, I piled my bags into the waiting car and we headed to the boarding house where I would stay for the next six weeks. As my advisor's brother introduced me to the old white Portuguese family that owned the boarding house as their new boarder, the researcher from the United States, I discovered that my blackness could be a problem for

them. Until 1975, Mozambique was a Portuguese colony in which the white settler regime established a racial hierarchy with black Africans at the bottom. The family that owned the boarding house had moved from Portugal to Mozambique in the 1950s and had enjoyed a moderate lifestyle based on their ownership of land. The entire staff of the boarding house consisted of black Africans who referred to the owner as “patron,” displaying a type of deference reminiscent of the type of relationship that existed under colonialism. All of the other boarders were either white South African or European. Although I was tired, borderline sick, and bleary eyed, my contact’s brother and I “convinced” the older white couple that I indeed would not be a problem as they laid out all of their stipulations with regards to meals, coming, and going. I am sure the fact that I paid cash—American dollars—helped to set them at ease.

Before I arrived it had never occurred to me to email my in-country advisor a photo of me and in some other way inform him of my blackness. My experience during my first day in Maputo, and subsequent experiences, reflect the ways in which race, gender, and nationality converge and have significant consequences for the dynamics of social power. Over the next six weeks, and then again over the course of a year (2003–2004), my African American-ness and the fact that I am a woman had some interesting implications for the success of my research and for me socially, which I had not anticipated before entering my field site.<sup>1</sup>

Using feminist and qualitative methodologies in the field—including spending an extended amount of time in the field immersed in culture and politics, acting as a participant-observer, and other methods—presents dilemmas, rewards, and challenges. Feminist inquiry centers on studying women from the perspective of their own experiences. It treats women as agents of knowledge who articulate the structural and material conditions of their own lives vis-à-vis society. Feminist inquiry leads to research that “strives for reciprocity, collaboration and advocacy in an attempt to address longstanding inequalities based on gender, race, and class in participants’ lives and in the researcher-participant relationship.”<sup>2</sup> This requires that feminist researchers take the post-modern turn and place their own class, race, and gender assumptions “in the frame of the picture that she attempts to paint.”<sup>3</sup> This type of reflexivity also leads to evaluation of the researcher’s identity within the context of the field and their informants’ perceptions with regard to the researcher. As a feminist researcher, I early on disabused myself of any notion that I was

a “dispassionate scholar.” Indeed, I often found myself acting as a scholar, a friend, and a cultural ambassador in the field.

## Woman Outsider Researching Women in Southern Africa

My research in Maputo focused on women who participated in the armed military struggle for independence from the Portuguese from 1963 to 1975, and members of the postindependence Afro-socialist educational campaigns and societies that used the experiences of the war for independence to advance women’s rights in the newly democratic Mozambique. I wanted to know the extent to which these women successfully applied the organizing skills they acquired during the armed liberation struggle to the campaign for democracy. I observed that women who had previously been a part of the Organization of Mozambican Women (OMM), the women’s wing of Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), were in a unique position to make demands on the state on behalf of women. After independence FRELIMO became the nation’s ruling party in a one-party system. The women’s experiences in the armed liberation struggle fostered a unique gender consciousness centered on women’s rights. Their very presence in the FRELIMO army and later as combatants in the Women’s Detachment undermined the dominant social and gender norms around women’s roles, abilities, and potential.

I also observed that women who participated in the liberation struggle gained invaluable experience by educating Mozambican peasants about the goals of the armed liberation struggle that FRELIMO waged against Portuguese colonialism. These educational campaigns included women’s ideas about the postindependence “new man,” and, by extension the “new woman.” Finally, these women who were part of the armed liberation struggle developed some very valuable and specific organizing and framing skills that helped them relate to those whom they were working with, working for, and trying to recruit to FRELIMO.

During the course of the ten years prior to my fieldwork—1992 to 2002—Mozambique experienced the end of a protracted civil war and now, three national election cycles, reaffirming its commitment to institutionalized democracy. Women mobilized primarily at the grassroots level in the context of opposition movements against the Portuguese colonial regime and later against the South African

destabilization campaign.<sup>4</sup> After democratization, women's political activism shifted to buttressing "a space in the state" through state feminist agencies, the election of women to political office, the adoption of women's rights policies, and the incorporation of gender-based concerns into the mandates and budgets of government agencies.<sup>5</sup>

Framing can determine the participants, the strategies, methods, targets, and success of any given social movement. This becomes increasingly important in an instance where democratic impulses and unfettered political mobilization on the part of nonpolitical elites is a relatively recent phenomenon. Within the context of Mozambique, prior to independence and even after FRELIMO took control of the state, in many instances the state/party apparatus determined and articulated many of the people's ideas, rights, and demands for them, as is often the case in a one-party state. A consequence was that the articulation and formulation of rights claims and demands that were based in anything other than party ideology or which were at odds with party ideology and goals were limited. Within the FRELIMO Afro-Marxist political regime, citizenship and one's rights and obligations vis-à-vis the state were "determined" or prescribed by the FRELIMO state. However, even within this Afro-Marxist state, FRELIMO stated its commitment to the struggle for women's rights and ending gender inequity within society. While the rhetoric of gender equality far outpaced actual policies meant to ensure "women's emancipation," at the very least, the idea of addressing the cultural, socioeconomic factors that kept women—especially peasant women—oppressed became part of the national discussion on rebuilding the nation.

This, in turn, leads to the issue of the degree of autonomy (or lack thereof) that the OMM enjoyed as the women's arm of the FRELIMO Party and the one-party state. Women's autonomy from political parties, especially in the context of a one-party state, is crucial to the articulation of a political agenda for women that meets their needs.<sup>6</sup> While political liberalization opened the door to a plethora of women's organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, it posed specific problems for women's groups that were formerly tied to the state. Particularly, women's groups now had to rearticulate their goals and position themselves to compete with new groups. Often, this task of renegotiating the identity of the women's wing of the party involved the loss of political elites to other parties or organizations breaking with certain aspects of the party's ideology and changes in rank and file membership as well.

The women whom I interviewed at Maputo and later Beira had been a part of the political elite in both FRELIMO and OMM. As

they explained to me, their experiences in mobilizing and educating for the movement were transformative for them. These experiences also influenced the ways in which they applied their expertise as social and political organizers in the newly democratic Mozambique. I interviewed a variety of female leaders including former OMM presidents, former women combatants, governmental minister, prominent women in the nongovernmental organization community, opposition party members of parliament as well as other women who were not part of any of the abovementioned groups but had grassroots connections and interests in women's issues.

My methodology included structured interviews that I conducted between December 2003 and July 2004. They included 27 women who were current members/elites in the aforementioned communities. Some interviewees presented their life histories while others offered detailed information on various events. Other aspects of this research included unstructured interviews, analysis of group propaganda, organizational ethnographies, and participating in social and political activities. For example, during my 11-month stay in Maputo, I made day-trips to the organizations in the provinces close to the capital, and traveled for weekend visits with some groups as a participant-observer to Beira, the central coastal region of Mozambique, to attend a conference on domestic violence in Mozambique.

I used snowball sampling, the method of relying on initial respondents for referrals to subsequent respondents. I was relatively unfamiliar with the terrain beyond what an initial six-week research trip had yielded the previous summer. During those initial months of my eleven-month trip, I spent a significant amount of time cold-calling organizations and personally gathering organizational literature. Once I obtained an interview, I explained the nature of my research to all interviewees and organizational members with whom I came into contact. I also employed the help of a research assistant, a student at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, to help set up interview times, transcribe Portuguese interviews, and occasionally accompany me on day-trips as my Shangaan translator. In many ways, she helped me navigate the cultural, social, and linguistic landscape of southern Mozambique, a landscape that was different for me as an African American researcher than perhaps it was for my white colleagues who had conducted research in Mozambique before me. Further, as a black woman walking through the streets of Maputo, even though I "stuck out," my race colored my interactions with people and their

perceptions of me. This was reflected in the ways in which people responded to me in different everyday situations.

## Race and Nationality in the Field

My advisor in Mozambique is a prominent scholar researching gender and women in southern Africa at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. She was suggested to me through a mutual colleague/friend, and via email she agreed to serve as my advisor and supervise my research while I was in the field in Maputo. After I had established a rapport with my in-country advisor, about three weeks into my initial visit to Maputo, I asked her, “Why did you all think I was white?” “Oh,” she replied, “because the people who come here from the U.S. to do research are white.” Her comment reflects the experience of many scholars in southern Africa. Often knowledge production about African women’s lives is conducted by non-African scholars from the North for consumption by non-African audiences in the West. This is problematic because epistemological issues—who can be the knower and articulator of whose experience—follow us into the field and in some instances color the interactions that we have with other scholars and informants in the site. Subsequently, the experience of regional scholars and informants with other researchers who preceded me had an impact on their perception of me, of my work, and at times called into question my qualifications as a researcher.

My identity as an African American woman conducting doctoral research in Mozambique initially cast me as an anomaly, or at least a curious oddity with regard to the community’s perception of the usual field researcher from the United States. I cannot say whether my blackness got me more interviews or a warmer response in various social situations or more personal accounts of particular events. Many women had already shared their life experiences with other researchers from the United States. It certainly did not garner me immunity from charges by southern African women scholars that I was part of the process of the recolonization of knowledge about their lives. In this sense, these women argued that scholars from the West continue to conduct research on the African other, extracting information and knowledge of their lives and using it for our own purposes. Central to this critique is the idea that Africans are capable and in the best position to tell their own stories, histories accurately. Nonetheless, scholars from the West continue to conduct research and enjoy a position of privilege with regard to publishing works

about Africans. This represents a new type of colonization of knowledge about Africa. Certainly I was asked at least three times why I came across the Atlantic to conduct research on African women as opposed to conducting research on African American women in my own homeland. I could not ignore the legacy of U.S. and Western imperialism in Mozambique, the region, and in academia. Solidarity and shared experiences based solely on gender can neither be taken for granted nor dismissed.<sup>7</sup> And as Aaron Cicourel has noted, “the nature of [anthropologist’s] data is largely determined by his [social] identity as seen by his subjects.”<sup>8</sup>

On research and race in Brazil, Michael Hanchard suggests that his identity as a black scholar, in terms of his racial and social status, “had as much to do with Brazilian views on Blackness in the United States as it had to do with me as an individual.”<sup>9</sup> My experiences are a testament to the relevance of this argument for Mozambique. As a participant observer, I built a rapport with my informants by responding to their questions and inquiries about life and conditions of African American women in the United States. Responding to questions or comments about “my country,” my life, and status based on my gender and race in an honest and forthcoming manner mitigated my strangeness and forced me to reflect, from a very different perspective, on my life as a black woman academic. I often found that some of the more difficult questions centered on the appropriateness—or, in some informants words, the unfairness—of affirmative action programs for African Americans, the successes or failures of the Civil Rights Movement, and my take on women in hip-hop and rap videos. For me, outside of the context of a shared collective historical memory and cultural backdrop that living and discussing life as a black woman in the United States provides, it became difficult to explain some of the twists and turns that American and African American history and life have taken over the past five decades. The questions did not make me uncomfortable with my respondents, but in many ways they made me uncomfortable with the narratives that we construct around these issues that heretofore I may have taken for granted.

### **“Ola Menina!!”: Gender and Identity in Informal Settings in the Field**

Those who have conducted field research in another country for more than three months know the importance of developing friendships in

the field that will sustain you. In addition to my in-country advisor, American ex-patriots, fellow Fulbrighters, and American embassy staff, I developed close friendships with three Mozambican women, all of whom were within five years either side of the age of thirty. These women became my cohort, friends, and sounding board, and kept me grounded in the field. They also provided me with frank, urban Mozambican women's perspectives and strategies on behavior and social norms with regard to sexual harassment and unsolicited attention.

"Psss psss pss!" I hissed back as Olga and I passed a group of men on the busy *baixo* streets of Maputo.<sup>10</sup> Sensing my irritation, Olga half jokingly cautioned me to stop responding to catcalls in this manner or I was going to "get us hurt." I paid little heed to Olga's admonishments and kept my quick pace. Upon leaving my apartment to go for interviews, to go to the market or to the embassy, I was greeted on the street with leers/calls of *Ola menina* (girl) or *Ola fofinha* (soft cuddly woman) and "Pss, psss, pssss!" every time I walked out the door. This experience of negotiating catcalls and intimidating behavior from local men is not a new experience for women researchers in their field sites. Lindsey Gifford and Rachel Hall-Clifford correctly point out that women have "special concerns" with regard to close "social scrutiny based on the body."<sup>11</sup> This close social scrutiny leads to "safety concerns and resulting restrictions on movement; management of reputation in the field site while maintaining an independent research schedule and actually conducting our research."<sup>12</sup>

Researchers are judged, liberated, or constrained by the social norms that we carry with us from our native society into the field and from the field itself. Simply learning these norms and social behavior is an enormous part of fieldwork. In the field, one is continuously negotiating one's whole self not only with the locals, but with oneself, in a manner that is conducive to conducting research.<sup>13</sup> When it comes to navigating the professional and social identity of a western woman field researcher, cultural and social norms around gender in the field take center stage. I had to reconcile my understandings of the norms in Maputo and my own feminist leanings to navigate the rules of catcalls.

My reaction to unsolicited comments and harassment on the streets or in cafes and restaurants varied. Sometimes, I ignored them. At other times I hissed back, glared, or threw a hostile gesture. My three Mozambican women friends had different reactions. Olga stated that it was a part of everyday life in the city for women who were walking

alone or with other young women. It certainly did not help, she always added, that I was an exotic foreigner—the exotic, in this case, by virtue of being a foreigner and an African American.<sup>14</sup> But she also cautioned me to be careful how I reacted as some men would not hesitate to move beyond comments toward actual physical contact. Of course, she had her own car and drove almost everywhere. Another friend, Cristina, would generally hiss back or shoot back “pss psss is for cats, I am not a cat.” Incidentally, it was from her that I originally gained the courage to hiss back. Finally, another friend just ignored them, but she also took taxis everywhere. These varied reactions represented three different ways of negotiating what was for me a daily annoyance at best and at worst a sometimes hostile space.

Norms and customs in Maputo made it generally acceptable for men to lob unsolicited remarks and catcalls at women, particularly young women walking down the street. Perhaps some thought it was harmless, perhaps others did not care. What I experienced as sexual harassment was in the eyes of some of my friends and informants, no more than the “norm” for behavior of some men on the streets. This is not to say that my three friends were not bothered by it, to some degree or another they all at least noticed it. However, their reactions are telling in that all but one of the women seemed to accept it as a part of daily life. She either ignored it or was afraid to respond out of fear of escalating the situation. As I spent most of my time travelling by *chapa* (public transportation), taxi, or on foot alone I could not help but notice and, despite my best attempts, be affected by what I considered an unwanted gaze upon my body. The catcalls and remarks in no way kept me from conducting my field research and I never felt that I was physically in danger of being attacked or even touched. But, I would argue that this gendered phenomenon belies the matrix of power relations from which these gazes emerge. I use this example in order to point out how my race and gender thrust me in the middle of this power matrix and provided me with a firsthand experience of some of the norms that reflect patriarchal relations in the urban areas.

Many social scientists view fieldwork that lasts more than three months as unnecessary soaking and poking. Very few of us receive funding to conduct extensive trips to the field. Those of us who do are sent with our suitcases, books, memories from home and notes from a qualitative methods class—usually taken in an anthropology department—into the field. Experiences in the field are rarely discussed among social science colleagues, but these can have an impact on

our work. I have focused on a few of my complex, multilayered experiences in the field. I went to study Mozambican women in politics, but found that my own body, positionality, and identity became a site of contestation for my informants in Mozambique and for me. It is important to acknowledge the impact that positionality have on daily living and research in the field and expect these types of experiences. I suggest that social science researchers take a cue from our colleagues in anthropology, who have written extensively on the importance of reflection on identity before going to the field, while in the field, and upon one's return.

## Notes

- \* This chapter appeared in a slightly revised version as "We Thought You Would Be White: Race and Gender in Fieldwork" in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 42, no. 3 (April 2009): 291–294.
- \*\* Thank you to Bertin Louis, Jr., to Meg Rincker, Candice Orbital, Benjamin Talton, and Quincy Mills for their comments on several versions of this chapter.
- 1. Identity here consists of both the self "developed and experienced internally, through one's own perceptions and experiences of the social environment" and social identity which is externally defined by others in accordance with standardized cultural and social norms and social roles." See Takeyuki Tsuda, *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 9–10.
- 2. Cristina M. Alcalde, "A Feminist Anthropologist's Reflections on Dilemmas of Power and Positionality in the Field," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7, no. 2 (2007): 144.
- 3. Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism and Methodology*, by Sandra Harding, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1987), 1–14; Tsuda, *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland*.
- 4. Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, "National Liberation and Women's Liberation: Mozambican women in the Armed Struggle, 1962–1975" (Center for African Studies, Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique, 1983). Paper presented at UNESCO Experts Meeting on The Role of Women in Angola, Guinea Bissau Mozambique and Zimbabwe.
- 5. Laurie A. Brand, *Women, The State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 6. Aili Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (Oxford: James Currey Press, 2000).
- 7. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*,

- eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, 51–81 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).
8. cf. Cicourel 1964:42, as quoted in Tsuda, *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland*, 10.
  9. Michael G. Hanchard, “Racism, Eroticism and the Paradoxes of Black U.S. Researcher in Brazil,” in France Winddance Twine and Jonathon W. Warren eds. *Racing Research and Researching Race: Methodological Dilemmas in Critical Race Studies*, 165–186 (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 167.
  10. Names have been changed to protect the identity of those in Mozambique. These friends were urban, young, middle to upper middle class African women who spoke both Portuguese and English.
  11. Lindsey Gifford and Rachel Hall-Clifford, “From Catcalls to Kidnapping: Towards an Open Dialogue on the Fieldwork Experience of Graduate Women,” *Anthropology News* 49, no. 6 (2008): 26–27.
  12. Ibid.

*Mamatoma*, “The Chief’s Namesake”:  
Language, Gender, and Age as Categories  
of Belonging in Sierra Leone

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For African Americans, notions of identity and belonging have continually evolved across generations. Whether conceived of as African, colored, Negro, Afro-American, person of color or African American, the parameters of “blackness” have shifted mightily according to historical time period, cultural constructs, and geographical location. Perceptions of identity and belonging may also shift and evolve within the life of an individual, for example as a result of new experiences and encounters. My own awareness of the malleability of “black” identity was sharpened through living in Africa and years of conducting research as a historian of Africa. Though choosing to study African history in graduate school was very much a product of my self-identification as a black cultural nationalist, quite surprisingly, my research and my profession allowed me to explore new constructions of identity that freed me from the racial and gender binaries that I had grown up with and which I had assumed were inherent in every society.

I began a study of female chieftaincy in Sierra Leone because of my interest in women’s political activity in precolonial Africa, and traveled there for research several times over a period of more than twenty-five years. Indeed it has been a full generation since I first went to Sierra Leone in 1981 as a graduate student to “do my research.” And though I had taken a course on “Field Research Methods” with Jan Vansina, the “dean” of African history at the University of

Wisconsin and felt that I knew what my research agenda would be, I found, as ethnographers from many disciplines have noted, that the research one actually produces in “the field” is very much a result of the research environment one finds and the person that inhabits that research environment.<sup>1</sup> In the intervening years, the fullness of my research endeavor has become clearer as I have come to understand the process of incorporation that enabled and shaped my research project. I found that this process, in effect a process of belonging, required that I understand and accept new categories of identity, status, and meaning. Indeed the parameters of these categories were defined by intersectionalities new to me, and which carried cultural meaning and status markers that I would never have imagined before my research time abroad. I began to understand when I lived there in 1981, and understood better when I returned in 1995 and then again in 2005 and 2007, that age and education marked social status more profoundly than money, that language and nationality, not race, marked difference, and that motherhood marked the construction of female gender.

Furthermore, it has become clear over the years that a dialectic process of change has shaped not only my research agenda, but my identity as well. Like Sadiya Hartman, when I went to Africa, I was looking for some place to belong, to capture something that had been lost.<sup>2</sup> But unlike Hartman, I found a place in Africa and people to which to belong. Though, like her, I started my African journey as a stranger, unlike her, I did not remain one.

## Background

The longest period of time I resided in Sierra Leone was the fourteen months I spent in the country collecting the documents and interviews I would use for my dissertation. During my first trip in 1981, I had thought that my race (black) and my gender (female) would allow me to “see” African women better than earlier researchers, who for the most part had been white or male or both, and to better understand and sympathetically assess the history of female political activity in precolonial Sierra Leone. But confusion and difficulty initially arose in my efforts to acclimate and construct a research design because the categories of power and social identity that operated there did not fit within the tripartite model of “race, class, and gender” that structured my own basis for knowledge production, and that of other scholars of the industrialized North. Even though I would say that I

had learned to manage the hegemonic categories of my own culture, my unfamiliarity with the hegemonic categories of the new culture made the research effort exponentially complicated. After I arrived in the country prepared—I thought—to carry out my research agenda, it rapidly became clear to me that power relations and categories of identity were defined by markers unfamiliar to me as an American.

The categories of identity and power that to me had seemed so clear in the United States, either simply did not operate, or were replaced by other new and initially inexplicable ones. For example, other new and important status markers were age and literacy.<sup>3</sup> One category that did not operate at all in Sierra Leone as it did in the United States was the category of race. Gender in Sierra Leone could be turned and twisted a few different ways but was normally defined as heterosexual and was almost always linked to childbearing, an important status marker for both men and women. Indeed, let me suggest that it is possible to replace our well-defined American tripartite "race, class, and gender" intersectionalities with "age, education, language, and motherhood (for women)" as markers of social hierarchy and identity definition in Sierra Leone.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, I found that "belonging" was a critical component of my research agenda for which I had not been prepared. I arrived in the country in 1981 and it quickly became clear that having all the proper papers and clearances from this or that department or institute did not automatically privilege me to information. I was too young, too foreign. I was a woman, I spoke English, and I had no in-country family relations or political connections. How could I work? Who would help this naive, powerless "stranger from America" collect her oral narratives? I soon learned that I needed to "belong" to someone or some group. It became clear that everyone who is a "stranger" (variously understood as a guest, outsider or visitor) needs to become "a client" in order to get anything done, though I would not have been able to articulate it as such at the outset of my research project.

## Belonging

I learned that moving from complete "stranger" status to some measure of belonging was linked to an unspoken but soon apparent process of incorporation into new categories including "landlord/stranger" or "landlord/client."<sup>5</sup> Certainly if one belonged, the unspoken question was, to whom did you belong? Who are your people? Who can vouch for you? Who is "for" you and who are you "for?" My credentials as

a graduate student and my formal status as a research associate at the African Studies Institute allowed me to reside at Fourah Bay College (FBC) and placed me in the college hierarchy somewhere between the female undergraduate students and the faculty. But that location was clearly insufficient to carry out my research agenda in Mendeland, “upcountry,” and out of Freetown. Even in Freetown, I needed to “belong.”

Fortunately, for the first few months that I was based at the college and spent most of my research time in the National Archives, I was befriended by a female college student who liked “strangers” and I became her “padi” (friend) and, in some ways, her “client.” We travelled everywhere together and I met everyone in her immediate family, her extended family, and most of her friends at FBC and in town. Indeed, this young woman maintained a wide and impressive network of contacts and her vivacious personality, beauty, and brilliance were well known in Freetown, as well as in the regional capitals of Bo, Kenema, and Makeni. She quite consciously introduced me to people she thought might be able to help me with my research. Many doors were opened to me when I was introduced as her friend, or if I merely mentioned her name. Her father was also a well-known and respected academic, university administrator, and former government official who also supported my work, though he was much too busy to devote much time to me. And though my friendship with this young woman was invaluable for learning how to dress, how to move around the country, and how to understand and speak Krio, the country’s lingua franca, it did not enable me to directly pursue my research on traditional Mende women rulers.

I had already decided that for my research I should live with a female paramount chief, and after listening to the advice of sympathetic friends, and preliminary visits to the chiefdom towns of three female paramount chiefs, I was taken to meet the woman paramount chief of Small Bo Chiefdom in Blama, a medium-sized town a few miles from Kenema, the Eastern Province capital. Madam Mamawa Benya was one of thirteen women paramount chiefs then holding office in Sierra Leone. She, like all the 118 paramount chiefs, ruled a chiefdom, the primary administrative unit of the country’s local government structure. Like the other chiefs, she received a salary from the government and was responsible for the well-being of the people in her chiefdom, which numbered approximately 6,000. Benya had been elected chief in 1962, by the chiefdom councilors, from among a slate of other candidates representing recognized chiefly families.

Like other paramount chiefs, she was expected to rule for life once elected, and by 1981, twenty years into her tenure in office, she was well known as a dynamic and beloved leader of the chiefdom people and her extensive kinship network.

The work I have produced since then has been very much a product of the relationship that I established with the chief from that time going forward. My work, like the work of other historians and anthropologists or any other scholars visiting Sierra Leone since at least the sixteenth century, has been much affected by "landlord/stranger" conventions that define the essential relations between the people of the region and outsiders. In all cases, the visitor's mission, race, gender, age, language, ethnicity, and cultural background configured those relationships and shaped the texts that were produced.

From the moment paramount chief Madam Mamawa Benya granted me permission to live in her town, I settled into a "landlord/stranger" relationship that fairly quickly evolved into a quasifamilial one. I will never forget the friendly, warm, and slightly amused look she gave me as the Mende lawyer I had met through my Freetown "padi"(friend) explained to the chief in Mende what I needed and what my research entailed. Replying in Mende, she told us that everything would be arranged, that we should buy a bag of rice, and come back in a week's time. As I soon came to realize, her agreement to host me now made me her "stranger" and therefore her responsibility.

When I returned the next week, I went straight to her compound, and she explained, through other Mende friends who had come to help me settle in, where I would stay and what I could expect. At first I was very disappointed to learn that I would not be staying at her compound, and was afraid this did not auger well for our relationship. Perhaps, I thought, despite her kind words and apparent openness, she did not trust me and wanted to keep me at a distance. Sensing my apprehension, she explained that I would be more comfortable staying with people who spoke English. And after I was taken to meet the English-speaking widow who lived in the big house that had an indoor bathroom and whose two daughters were living in Queens, New York, I decided that Madam Benya was right. I would be more comfortable. Though I could see this would kill my last opportunity to be immersed in the Mende language and gain any real fluency.

And so, though I was housed elsewhere, I became Madam Benya's "stranger" and by extension, the "stranger" of all her large household consisting of many brothers, mothers, wives, children, nieces and nephews. Though she had only one husband, a chief of a nearby

chiefdom, her brothers had numerous wives and children, as had her late brother, Chied Foday Benya. As head of the Benya extended family, Madam Benya was ultimately responsible for the wives and children of the brothers who lived with her, as well as those of her late brother. Furthermore, some of her husband's younger wives and their children lived under her protection as well. All of the wives' offspring were considered to be Madam Benya's children and she organized their education and paid their school fees.

She assigned one of her "sons" (by our reckoning a nephew) to act as translator and to give me Mende lessons. My daily pattern of work was to call at the chief's compound in the morning and share itineraries. I often accompanied Madam Benya, universally known in the chiefdom as "Mama" (literally grandmother), on her visits to other towns and villages in the chiefdom. Early in my stay, she took me to the provincial headquarters to meet the district and province level officials I needed to know for research purposes, as well as for security reasons. She also introduced me to the member of Parliament from that region who was her great friend. With all these introductions, Madam Benya in effect vouched for me and announced her responsibility for me as her guest. Furthermore, her sponsorship extended to all the interviews I conducted in neighboring chiefdoms, where being introduced as Madam Benya's stranger from America gave me an entrée and gave my work legitimacy, recognition, and validity.

Moreover, as time went on, her sponsorship also gave me a family, because before the year was out, my first stay, my identity evolved from that of being a complete "stranger from America" to a state of "belonging" that included the rather a naming ceremony in which I took the name of my sponsor and gained a title, *mamatoma*.

The naming ceremony seems to have formalized my incorporation into the Benya clan. I had always wanted an African name, but had decided that sort of picking one from a book negated the beauty of African naming practices, so I had thought to wait until I got to the continent. I mentioned this interest to the woman I roomed with and she told the chief and lots of other people and for a couple of days there was a bit of competition to suggest names for me, all of which had sentimental value to those that offered them. However, none of the proffered names really appealed to me. But when it was suggested that since the chief was sponsoring the naming ceremony, by custom I should take her name, I somehow felt that was the right thing to do. I admired Madam Benya, and her name, Mamawa, literally meant

"important woman," something that I aspired to be one day. When I told her I had chosen to be Mamawa like her, she happily beamed a huge smile.

In the end, the naming ceremony was somewhat less ceremonious than I had hoped, though all the basic elements were there: I was fed with a paste of rice flour; prayers were said; my new name was whispered in my ear; and I was led outside where my name was spoken out loud so that God and the ancestors would know me. What I found however was that though the naming ceremony bound me to my new family, it also structured my subordinate status as a youngster in the family, a preadult unmarried daughter emphasized by the fact that, in this region the naming ceremony is called in Krio, "pull pikin na do," and it is done for babies when they are eight days old. The idea of a naming ceremony for an adult was odd, even laughable. One mark of my status in the scheme of things was that other than the chief and her speaker, all the other attendees at my naming ceremony were children from the compound who found the whole idea of an adult to be "pulled na do" hugely amusing.

However for me, being adopted into the chief's household signaled a claim to a home in Africa, a home that my cultural nationalist sensibilities had always longed for. Being thus named allowed me to claim a place in a way that claiming the soil of Virginia or North Carolina could only be made through the blood of sacrificed freedom and generations of hard unpaid labor. And even that claim could only be made with the knowledge that white McNeills, Days, and Nixes had probably long since sold the land on which my enslaved great grandparents had worked and died.

So in Mendeland I was reborn as *Mamatoma*, the chief's namesake. I was now her grown daughter, a Benya daughter. No other female paramount chiefs' lives could now be as important as hers. More than ever, I felt a sense of loyalty to her as well as a loyalty to my ostensibly objective research. I felt a strong desire to communicate her life, her struggles, to explain and chronicle her travails. I had been accepted into the family, but at what cost to the objectivity of my work? And yet this relationship ensured my work. Indeed, Madam Benya's life history became the only one to which I would truly have access. For the other female paramount chiefs of the region, I was now not only Madam Benya's "stranger," but I was also her daughter. Any clientship potential with other chiefly houses was effectively closed off, since I had effectively inherited Madam Benya's enemies as well. In violation of my University of Wisconsin field research axioms, it

would now be impossible for me to gain trusted access to competing ruling houses and their variant oral traditions. By the rules of up-country chiefdoms, I had joined the Benya house.

## Age and Seniority

Age and seniority had a substantially different impact on my research when I was a graduate student than when I returned in 1995. When I first went to Sierra Leone in 1981, I was in my mid-twenties and five years beyond college graduation. I had passed my comprehensive exams. I had worked in a very responsible job for more than a year. I had buried my grandfather. I had travelled to foreign, non-English-speaking countries alone. As far as I was concerned, I was a grown woman. In Sierra Leone, however, what counted most in defining my age was that I was unmarried, childless, young-looking, and comparatively thin, with smallish, rather pointed breasts. I was therefore frequently thought of and referred to as “titi,” literally “girl.” This subordinate girl status made it virtually impossible for me to meet with village elders for formal interviews without the intervention of someone of senior status whom they respected. At the same time, no one seemed to expect me to pay for anything or even to “dash” (tip) on any consistent basis. I was simply too young, too junior, to have clients of my own.

However, when I returned in January of 1995, I was forty-one, a university professor, married, and had a four-year-old son. I had earned a PhD. I had gained twenty-five pounds, my breasts were no longer pointed, and no one referred to me as “titi” any more, always “mami.” Clearly by the reckoning of the people in the country, I had arrived at female adulthood and senior status. What did all this mean for access? It meant that I was taken seriously. It meant that people wanted to talk to me. The power differential had changed. I had things to offer now. My professional status opened doors. Deans and department heads were assembled to confer with me. Important meetings of paramount chiefs were delayed for the sake of my interviews. I was ushered in to see secretaries of state of various government departments who offered me tea and coffee and urged me to stay while others were kept waiting. And further, unlike the year that I was a young “titi,” I was now expected to pay for services and to dash liberally. I was now an adult female with position and money who, like other older women, was often seen as a potential patron and less as a potential client.

Furthermore, not only had I changed, but by 1995 when I returned to the country, the research environment had also drastically changed. Three years earlier, In 1992, rebels launched an insurgency first in the east and south. Over a ten-year period it killed and displaced multiple thousands of people and destroyed much of the nation's already fragile infrastructure. By January 1995, the civil war, which was to ultimately last until 2002, had raged for three years. Unlike the relatively peaceful, bucolic country that I visited first in 1981, the Sierra Leone of 1995 was tense, barely managing to maintain some semblance of life under military rule and was slipping to the bottom of every world measure of national productivity. The attacks on civilians, the looting, violence, and displacement that marked the war years meant that I encountered an entirely different country when I disembarked from the plane. From the tiny boy without hands who silently begged for money at the airport, to the throngs of displaced people who crowded the city streets, to the armed soldiers at every intersection, the realities of the ongoing war and dangerous instability in the countryside meant that travel outside of Freetown was impossible. Though I had returned intending to go upcountry to see Madam Benya, the security situation meant that I had to cancel those plans. Therefore, because of the war I could not return to Small Bo Chiefdom, but, rather, was forced to remain in Freetown and conduct all my interviews there.

I soon learned that this new adult, senior status, as well as the prevailing political situation, had shifted the power differential and my relationships with Madam Benya and the other women leaders I had gone to meet, observe, and interview. Though I certainly still needed their consent and cooperation to pursue my research agenda, by 1995, my newly acquired senior professional status and their newly acquired status as displaced leaders cut off from their chiefdoms meant I was now expected to try to help the paramount chiefs I had come to interview.

The rainy season of 1995 was a time of real trouble for the paramount chiefs of the country. The rebel war had forced them all into refugee status. Madam Benya had fled to the relative safety of Kenema, the Eastern Province capital with most of her household. Several of the other women chiefs had moved to Freetown for safety. Their sources of income had dried up, their people were scattered in camps for the displaced, and indeed the future of the office of paramount chief itself was being widely questioned.

My presence as a university professor from America who wanted to hear the chiefs' stories, as well as my video camera and tape recorder,

created a high-profile visibility that might have seemed out of place before the war in their rural headquarters towns but was somehow appropriate, even welcome in urban Freetown. I gained some notoriety that year when I was interviewed on a public affairs television show, so everyone in town with a television knew who I was. After that, all the women chiefs (as well as the men on the chiefs' council) garnered some measure of visibility and prestige by meeting with me or promising to do so.

When I had first arrived in the contry in 1981 I needed "sababu" (Krio for "who you know") to conduct my work, and had relied on my new friends and the Benya's to provide it. In 1995, my age and senior status meant that I could provide some "sababu" for others. For example, I quickly established a friendly relationship with the minister of the interior, the government official to whom all the chiefs reported. The minister had lived in America, had a masters in political science, and spoke with me as an intellectual and professional equal. His nephew who lived and worked in the United States was a colleague and a friend. All of these indicators marked the minister as my very good contact, which was potentially very useful to the chiefs. Another useful connection was my contact at the U.S. embassy, where I had been asked to give a lecture as a visiting scholar. The day after my talk, the United States Information Services (USIS) officer sponsored a dinner at her home in my honor and asked me who I wanted to invite. This gave me the opportunity to bring all six women chiefs then resident in Freetown as well as four other women activists in town, to a wonderful, festive meal during an otherwise dreary and depressing period. It was the first time that the female paramount chiefs as a group had been invited to an embassy event. Thus, thirteen years after I had left, my new seniority and increased professional status meant that Mdam Benya's "stranger" now had "sababu" to share with others.

## Literacy and Education

Literacy and education were status markers that influenced my research differentially in 1981 and 1995. The critical distinction and understanding that literacy brings had never occurred to me in the industrialized United States, but I soon understood that literacy/non-literacy and formal education in general defined a person's place in the country's social hierarchy. Indeed, I found that a university education, especially a PhD carried more implications for status than

money does in the United States. The intersectionality of education and class became increasingly clear by the time I returned in 1995 with a PhD and a university professorship in hand.

The research methodology I have used and the research materials I have collected have been very much affected by my own level of education as well as those with whom I collaborated. I found that at a very basic level, literacy and shared educational background greatly influenced my relationships with those I interviewed. In 1981, my life history collection methodology was shaped by whether my interviewees were literate in English. In general, my relationships in Blama were very much shaped by my reliance on an interpreter and Madam Benya's representatives who accompanied and vouched for. In 1995, restricted by the war and working in urban Freetown, my familiarity with Mende marked my connections to the southern and eastern regions, but did not figure prominently in my research. In Freetown, Krio, the country's creole lingua franca, and English were sufficient to do my work.

As noted earlier, Madam Benya was not literate in English or Mende. In 1981, for Madam Benya and me, this meant whole sets of cultural and historical understandings to learn about, and every meeting revealed new insights to each of us about the world of the other. My lack of Mende and her lack of education in English meant that there was a gulf we needed to bridge. We could not do so directly; her brother or one of her "sons" always had to interpret for us. So it was through an interpreter that she asked me about my family and quickly learned everything about my parents and my sisters. She understood without my having to explain it, that I was often homesick and in need of family, connection, and protection. She encouraged me to speak Mende and would often quiz me in basic greetings and simple conversational cues and beamed proudly if I answered correctly. Like everyone else in the chiefdom, I called her "Mama" (grandmother) and meant it just like everyone else did. In the context of this rural environment, my ignorance of the Mende language configured my relationship with the chief as that of a daughter who needed her help, instruction, and support. My university education counted for little in such an environment.

When I returned to Sierra Leone in January 1995, the sociocultural markers of literacy/non-literacy configured my research methodology very differently than they had in the rural Eastern Province in 1981. Most tellingly, unlike Madam Benya, with whom I had spent so much time in 1981, the six women paramount chiefs I interviewed

in Freetown spoke English. All had gone to secondary school, two had gone to top private schools, and one had been a practicing nurse. Without the need for an interpreter, we communicated directly. Except for one then elderly lady, the others were middle-aged like me and we seemed to be in a similar if not identical age group. The relationships I developed with these women chiefs were very different than my relationship with Madam Benya in 1981. First of all, not being resident in their chiefdoms meant that they were not responsible for my safety and health. Furthermore, the power differential was not nearly as great as it had been before. In Freetown, we were all “strangers,” that is, guests of someone else. All the chiefs were away from their normal duties, their people, and their chiefdoms. In other words, each had been removed from her base of power. And though I was of course foreign, as an international crossroad, Freetown was a comfortable home base for me as well as the many other foreign nationals and native English speakers who resided there.

Thus, unlike the year I had conducted research as a graduate student in rural Blama, in Freetown I met the chiefs on a more equal footing. We could talk directly about shared mutual interests and my Freetown contacts proved to be very useful to them. For example, the educated women chiefs in Freetown were very aware of both national and international feminist issues. We talked about the upcoming Beijing women’s conference, their desire to attend, and discussed their strategies for making it there. I wrote a letter on their behalf to the minister of the interior, presenting a scholarly argument that as holders of customary positions of authority, they would make an important contribution to the conference goals of women’s empowerment. My visit to the city and my research interest in them heightened their visibility and aided their political networking. Again, the power differential had been reconfigured to one of more mutual support and equality.

As if to underscore the smoothness of the relationships that arose when the status markers of literacy and education matched in most respects, my interviews with a prominent woman government official, a university professor in my age group with a PhD from a British institution, were extraordinarily free-flowing. We needed no interpreter and she talked easily and without hesitation on topics mostly related to her work and the lives of ordinary women in the country. She was even willing to share her personal life and was completely at ease with the video camera. The types of narratives I produced as a result of our meetings reflected the equality in our relationship.

## Language and Race

In 1981, I was surprised to learn that one marker of identity that carried so much cultural import in the United States, but which did not operate as a hegemonic category in Sierra Leone at all was race. Given my own particular phenotype, complexion, and body type, I was perceived on sight alone as a *fulamusu* or "Fula woman." On one occasion, even when I explained I was born in America, my new acquaintance insisted that my father must have been a Fula man who had gone to America and had me there. As a Fula *musu*, I fit into an existing Sierra Leone identification scheme, but it was in the pantheon of Temne, Mende, Limba, Fula, or Krio and not the dichotomous black or white of the United States. All they knew when they saw me is that I looked liked the Fula people who had lived among them for generations, and indeed *fulamusu* became one of my nicknames. Other people, particularly in up-country villages, without meaning to insult me, referred to me as *puu-mui* or white person, to clear up any confusion about my identity that might arise just by looking at me, since I did not in fact speak Fula and was from overseas, or *puu*.

But what role did my racial memory and sense of racial kindred with the people of Blama play in my newfound home? The people there had no clear memory of a slave trade or foreign enslavement in their region. Only those who had been to college had any real knowledge of the blacks in America, some of whom called us "Negroes" with all the mongrel attachments connected to the term that Malcolm X had railed against. But what about when my identity as a black American was clearly understood? Did that mean any greater compatibility and ease in working with Madam Benya to collect her life history?

I recall one incident in particular that clarified for me the difference in perceptions of identity and race that I brought with me and those that operated up-country. I had been living in Blama for a couple of months, and I was hearing Mende rather well and generally feeling pretty comfortable in my new surroundings. Madam announced one day that my "sisters from America" were coming to the chieftom the next week and she was sure I would want to meet and spend time with them. When I was able to get the details of who these "sisters" were, I realized that they were from a church organization that sponsored short missionary tours of rural areas in various African countries. I tried to explain that just because we were from America did not mean

that we were sisters and moreover that they were probably white and therefore part of a group that had historically oppressed my own people that certainly meant that we were not sisters. My explanation of the historic distance between the races in my own country was incomprehensible to Madam Benya and was met with something akin to incredulity. Indeed, I only succeeded in planting a suspicion in her mind that I was perhaps not as well bred and properly socialized to support family and community as she would have supposed.

And so to please Madam Benya I did stop by the compound on the day the American group visited. When I arrived, they were being served a sumptuous meal around a long specially prepared table in the middle of her main parlor. As I walked in, wearing a traditional gown and head-tie and started speaking first Mende and then vernacular American English, they stared at me in amazement. They were indeed all white, from a rural area in a Western state and not the least bit academic or scholarly. Nevertheless, I greeted them and stayed for awhile to chat and exchange “where are you froms?” (my answer being Long Island). Madam smiled as we talked with ease and fluidity in American English. Just as I had thought, we had nothing in common, but my efforts to connect with them and “greet my sisters” smoothed things with Madam Benya whose own priorities of language and country of origin as markers of identity were confirmed and validated by my easy verbal communication with these women.

Indeed, race as an anticategory had hit me a couple of times when I had been identified as *puu-mui*, loosely translated from Mende as “white person.” One evening while strolling with the local court clerk in a remote town after a day of interviews and a nice dinner, some of those greeting us in the semidarkness of the village twilight asked if I were his wife. And to assure them I was not and to further identify this strange woman whom he was squiring around town, the court clerk quickly explained to the inquisitor that I was not his wife, but a visiting *puu-mui*. By that time I knew that *puu mui* meant “white person,” and I was immediately annoyed. Though my lovely gown, head-tie, new shoes, smooth brown complexion and leisurely saunter through town had marked me as a favored young wife and hidden my origin, my guide had exposed me as a *poseur*, not really one of them. He sensed my discomfort and quickly assured me that *puu* also meant foreign or from across the sea to assuage his now irritated guest. Though his apology and explanation somewhat eased the pain of disassociation and alienation I had felt by being labeled “white.”

Clearly my earlier assumption that being "black" made me one of them could safely be thrown out.

In general, language proved to be the primary marker of identity. It was my language that marked me as "white," a foreigner from overseas. To help me understand the Mende terminology and cultural construct, I was reminded by friends that *puu mitei* in Mende means "English spoon" or "imported spoon" like *puu mui* means English-speaking person from overseas. They explained that no matter the person's "color" or "race," if they spoke English and were from overseas, in Mendeland they would be considered "white" or English. Conversely, the more I was able to speak and understand Mende, the more I "belonged" to Small Bo.

However, in a not culturally constructed way, but in a more biologically essentialist way, my phenotypical characteristics connected me to the people of the region. Madam Benya frequently remarked that I looked like a younger sister of hers who had died young and who she still loved and missed. When we traveled together and I was, like Madam Benya, wearing a country cloth gown of one style or another, people often remarked that I could be her daughter. In another town, the elders noted that I bore a striking resemblance to the deceased Benya family female section chief about whom I had come to interview them. People seemed to take pleasure in my physical resemblance to the Benyas, a "racial" congruence that did not negate the fact that I was "white." Clearly this cultural definition of "racial" identity was unfamiliar to me and took lots of time and thought to process.

In body type and complexion I fit a prevailing image of female desirability, which meant I regularly fielded both discrete and some not-so-discrete overtures about my availability for marriage. As a single female whose answer to the common question, *bi hinii?* (Where is your husband?) was *Hinii ii yeya* (I don't have a husband), requests to couple up and or get married were common. I am not suggesting that a young white woman researcher would not be approached with marriage proposals. Indeed, Carol Warren posits a prevailing sexual desire for white female anthropologists in nonwhite developing countries where their rare whiteness and associations with wealth and "civilization" make them sought-after partners.<sup>6</sup> But in Sierra Leone, for a black female like me, there was no physical racial divide to bridge. I did not look unfamiliar and rare, but I looked like the many Fula women who represented indigenous female attractiveness.

Another essential racial similarity was hair. My hair is kinky like the women of the country and like theirs, and needs to be plaited to keep it neat. For the whole fourteen months I lived in the country, I normally kept it braided in local styles. The many afternoons I spent having my hair braided put me in the middle of the leisurely conversations that accompany the hours of twisting and pulling it takes to achieve the style. Furthermore, the skill of whoever had “plaited” for me provided immediate conversation starters. A discussion of braided styles, say a new Freetown style in Kenema, or a new Bo Town style in Freetown brought me into the regular discourse of young women all over the country and in effect muted my outsider status. Thus, race in its purest sense of specific physical characteristics bound me to this culture, even though race as a Pan-Africanist construct did not.

## Gender and Motherhood

I also found that gender as defined in Sierra Leone did not match my own familiar social constructions. Gender in Sierra Leone was considerably mediated by age and motherhood, and indeed it became clear to me that true, adult womanhood was only achieved through marriage and childbearing. The bond I had thought would be there on account of my biological femaleness in 1981 was only really established when I returned in 1995 as a married mother of a healthy child. Indeed, in 1981, my unmarried and childless status put me most often in the company of single men. Though I was certainly not biologically male, my gender was not constructed as a full adult “female” as it operated there, first because I was not initiated into the Bundu women’s “secret” society, second because I was not married, and thirdly because I did not have children.

When I stayed up country in Blama in 1981 and 1982, my evenings were normally spent with the twenty-something nephews of Madam Benya. They had no evening or early morning family responsibilities and neither did I. Unlike other women, I had no household chores and neither children nor husband to care for. We could stay up late because we did not have to be up at dawn to make fires, fetch wood and water, or start the day’s food preparation like other women of my age group. Unlike other women, I had leisure time and enough disposable, unencumbered income to regularly treat one or two of “the guys” to bottles of Guinness stout and Star beer at Midnight, the local drinking spot. I also had time to sit and listen to cassette recordings of the latest rhythm and blues and early hip-hop from America.

Furthermore, I often joined the boys in the very male atmosphere of the *poyo* spot, drinking palm wine with my younger brothers on a rough bench in the palm plantation whenever we learned that fresh palm wine was available. Thus I blurred my gender (as well as status) affiliation by being the *nyapoi* (young lady) who hung out at the boys' drinking spot.

The night I witnessed the Bundu celebrations for that year's initiation cycle underscored my outsider status vis-a-vis the women of the town and underscored the liminality of my gender identity in that culture. Small Bo Chiefdom was one of the dozens of chiefdoms in Sierra Leone that sponsored annual initiation ceremonies for girls. The basic Bundu initiation involved a series of stages through which girls became transformed into adult members of the community. The first was the highly contested practice of genital cutting. Second was a period of seclusion lasting days, weeks, or months in which the girls are under the supervision of society officials. They did chores for their sponsors and learned cultural songs, dances, and crafts. They could watch when women gave birth in the Bundu enclosure and were introduced to information and techniques concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. In general, they were forged into a sodality based on their common acceptance of the social values regarding womanhood. The last stage was marked by a procession in which the initiates, dressed in their best clothes and accompanied by their female relatives and the Bundu officials, returned to the town as adult women in an atmosphere of great celebration and feasting.<sup>7</sup>

The evening the girls were "pulled" from the Bundu enclosure, I had gone up to the chief's compound thinking I would sit with Madam Benya as usual only to be told that she was with the women in the Bundu enclosure. The boys teasingly warned me that if I went near the Bundu enclosure to find her, I would be grabbed by the Bundu officials and forcibly initiated. And as I certainly had no plans to undergo a clitoridectomy like the other women of this region, I watched with the young men from afar, as the nonstop drumming and singing from the Bundu enclosure continued all night under a bright full moon. Thus, during the Bundu ceremonies, my place was on the veranda of "the boys' house," where I sat listening and observing everything from a distance of more than fifty yards.

In 1981, in spite of my interest in interviewing women in Mendeland villages and spending time with them, those relationships proved hard to build. Very few women of my age were single and without children. We really had very little in common, and they rarely had time to talk

with me, even if they might have wanted to. Furthermore, most of them did not speak English well, nor had they been to school, unlike the young men. I quickly found that simply being female did not automatically assure my entrée into the company of women. One of my friends, a married woman with two children, seemed to like me and was always happy to put me up at her house in Bo. We talked fairly openly, she gave me clothes, and seemed to take a genuine interest in my health and my work in the country. But she was busy with her children, her husband's business, and entertaining family, both his and her own. So our opportunities to spend time together were quite limited as she lived her life as a busy wife and mother.

However, I found a sea change had occurred when I returned in 1995. Thirteen years later, having gotten married and having produced a son, eased all my in-country relationships, with both men and women. Questions that had inevitably arisen in 1981 and now arose again in conversation in 1995 regarding whether I was married and had any children were now answered in the affirmative, and warm satisfied smiles would always meet this information. Those who had known me from my unmarried and childless days in 1981 and 1982 seemed especially happy that I had achieved the milestones that they saw as vital and central achievements for any normal person. When I briefly saw her that afternoon in 1995, Madam Benya smiled and nodded approvingly when I pulled out the picture of my husband and son. I was no longer a liminal, incomplete person. I no longer had an important problem which needed to be solved or fixed.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, a bond of understanding and acceptance seemed to have magically been formed with all women over school girl age. My son, though not present, gave me an identity as a mother, therefore a real woman, and thus finally located me within the world of women. I was no longer a social aberration, no longer a healthy, attractive woman of marriageable age without husband or children. By their reckoning I was now a normal woman, a real woman with a properly socially constructed gender identity as a wife and mother. A commonality I had assumed we would share because of biological sameness was only now being shared because of motherhood and wifehood. In 1995 I began to sit comfortably with other married women and chat easily about a wide range of issues, starting with husband, children, and in-laws. The only new glitch was that they often marveled that at my age I had had only one child. They would ask incredulously, "Na wan grain pikin yu get?" (You have only one lone child?)

## Conclusion

Since the war ended in 2002, I have returned to the country twice. Over the years, I have continued my relationship with the Benya clan. When Madam's brother passed away in the late 1980s, I was expected to make a contribution to the funeral expenses. When one of my "brothers" broke his leg in 1990, and had to go for an extended medical treatment, I was expected to contribute and did. When the entire household from the chief's compound had to flee to Kenema in 1994, Madam Benya requested my help in buying a house, a request for several thousand dollars, which, sadly, I could not satisfy. During my second visit in 1995, Madam Benya came to Freetown by air in an effort to find resources for her hungry and displaced people in Kenema. I saw her briefly just before I boarded the ferry to go to the airport. I was able to treat her to lunch, take her around in my car to some of her appointments, and give her some money, but not much else to solve the overwhelming problems she faced during the war. She died the next year as a result of illness exacerbated by the poverty and stress of the war. Of course, I sent a customary contribution for funeral expenses. In 2005 I brought a check for several hundred dollars and presented it to the current chief, one of Madam Benya's nephews, to purchase chairs for the newly built community center in Blama. I was pleased to be able to help out in the postwar rebuilding efforts in the town.

Earlier in 2010, I was invited to attend a "pull pikin na do" ceremony in Dallas, Texas, for a baby girl born into the extended family, who had just been named Mamawa after the late chief. I was given special guest status and asked to make a speech. Extended family members who had been here in the United States when I lived in Blama marveled at the depth of my knowledge of Benya family history, and I was pronounced an exceedingly valuable member of the clan.

For me, any of the concerns expressed by Turnbull that interfacing with local categories of identity will subvert scholarly objectivity mean little next to the pride I take in maintaining connections to the people who have made my career possible.<sup>9</sup> As far as I am concerned, the relationships that have been forged and the honor of "belonging" give my research value beyond that of a purely academic exercise. Furthermore, I am always cognizant of the myriad ways that race, gender, and social identity can be constructed and I am now more than ever a global citizen, free of the one-dimensional lens of American racial and social identity. For unlike Sadiya Hartman, I found a mother in Africa.

## Notes

1. See for example, Niara Sudarkasa, "In a World of Women: Fieldwork in a Yoruba Community," in Peggy Golde, ed. *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Tony Whitehead and Mary Conaway, eds. *Self, Sex and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
2. Sadiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Coast* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
3. Anthropologists Caroline Bledsoe and Marianne Ferme explore age and other status markers in this region in their research. See Caroline Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980); "The Politics of Children: Fosterage and the Social Management of Fertility among the Mende of Sierra Leone," in *Births and Power: Social Change and the Politics of Reproduction*, ed. W. Penn Handwerker, 81–100 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990) for a discussion of age as a marker of seniority for women. See Marianne C. Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003) for an elegant analysis of clusters of cultural meaning marking status in Mende society.
4. See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* (1991) for a seminal discussion of the intersectionalities of race, class, and gender operating in the United States.
5. V. R. Dorjahn and Christopher Fyfe, "Landlord and Stranger: Change in Tenancy Relations in Sierra Leone," *Journal of African History* 3, no.3 (1962): 391–397.
6. Carol Warren, *Gender Issues in Ethnography*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).
7. Carol MacCormack, "Biological Events and Social Control," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no.1 (1977): 93–100; J.V.O. Richards, "Some Aspects of the Multi-Variant Socio-Cultural Roles of the Sande of the Mende," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 9, no. 1 (1975): 103–113.
8. In 1982, Madam Benya had offered to give me a little girl to adopt and take back with me to America since I clearly needed a child and it seemed that I would be a good mother and provide well for one of the children of the household. This kind of fosterage relationship was impossible to arrange because of State Department guidelines regarding international adoptions. Furthermore, I knew that as a single graduate student, I did not in fact have the means to care for a child at that time.
9. C. M. Turnbull, "Sex and Gender: The Role of Subjectivity and Fieldwork," in Whitehead and Conaway, eds. *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

## Accessing the Archives: Sources, Subjects, and Subjugation in the African World

*Kwasi Konadu*

Few historians have paid specific attention to relational issues of race, research, and power in their approaches to African and African diasporic history, although these layered and often-debated issues have much to do with our understanding and valuation of Africa and its diasporic communities in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. These parts of the world were not only embedded in the “Atlantic slave trade” that configured the “Africa” we know and its American diaspora, but where this enterprise has been debated the most and where race and research bring into sharper relief important power dynamics. In fact, the debate between the late Walter Rodney and John Fage over the impact of the “slave trade” on African and European societies underscores how research and writing remain deeply entangled with issues of power and race. The most enduring charge leveled against Guyana-born Walter Rodney is that “racialized,” diasporic Africans cannot emotionally or ideologically detach themselves sufficiently enough from racially proximate topics or sites of research in order to produce “untrammelled scholarship.”<sup>1</sup> In consequence, the implication is that white scholars are in essence nonracial and nonideological and therefore did not have an unstated agenda with their scholarship. Unlike Rodney, moreover, they have sought to write histories that focus on quantifying Africans in bondage rather than the historic impact of international enslavement on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> We must, however, concern ourselves with matters of race, research, and the power relations that shape how they unfold in the production

of knowledge about Africa and its diaspora, since the archives that we access—where we encounter sources and subjects—are located in subjugated African and diasporic locales and a racialized, draconian (neo-)European world.

This chapter explores some of the ways in which power relations between (neo-)European—commonly labeled the West—and the African world have shaped and still continue to condition research in Africa and its diasporic communities. By African world, I refer to the global distribution of African populations in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas as a result of historically situated movements, dispersals, migrations, and exile. In contrast, neo-European societies are those states that succeeded the colonial governments established by settler colonies outside of Europe and as a direct outcome of European global expansion and hegemony.<sup>3</sup> Power relations within and between society influence the production of knowledge and the value that societies place on it. A geographically and intellectually unstable “Atlantic world,” so popular in contemporary scholarship, represented a global shift in the balance of power and, consequently, a construction through European maps, travel accounts, charters, and legal instruments. These maps, accounts, and charters constitute the foundational sources archived and valued in (neo-)European societies and which form the very staple of our studies. Whether African diasporic life in white societies or in subjugated African ones, we access archives and societies that are still framed by silences and research subjects that reflect and share with us the very power relations that shape their lives as well as what we research and write. Using specific research experiences in Ghana, Brazil, and the Bahamas, this chapter calls for greater attention to these critical issues and to the scholarship on Africa and its diaspora that reflects them in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

## Research Matters I: Ghana 2001

In December 2001, I began research for my first major project, in Takyiman (Techiman District) in central Ghana, West Africa. As a research site, Ghana was quite literally chosen for me. I had a dream in which a healer, or spiritualist, told me that I had to go to Ghana if I wanted to know more about my great-great-grandmother. The dream corresponded with research that I was conducting at the time on my own family history and my grandfather’s work as an herbalist (*odun-sini*). The dream inspired me to go to Ghana. After I settled on Ghana

as a research site, I launched a project that focused on healers and their practices among the Akan people and what I term local archives of cultural knowledge—that is, proverbs, oral histories, drum texts, and cloth with graphic signs and patterns—conceptualized and interpreted medicine and healing in Akan societies over the past century.

Akan societies have historically been geographically located between the Komoé and Volta rivers and from the Atlantic littoral to the forest fringe. Culturally, they are defined by a shared language, ethos, calendrical system, sociopolitical order, traditions of origin, and a high degree of ideological conformity. Distinct from other societies in the region and largely homogeneous, the Akan remain the cultural nucleus of contemporary Ghana.

I arrived in Takyiman, one of the foundational Akan societies situated on the northern edge of the semideciduous forest, during the harmattan season and in a political climate in which John Agyekum Kufour had recently been elected as Ghana's president. As the dry and dusty winds blew from the savanna regions south of the Sahara desert into Ghana, this trip and the many that would follow involved key encounters, conversations, and debates that helped shape my early understanding and valuation of who and what I researched in the Ghanaian and African diasporic context.

These developments were directly related to my personal background. I was born to parents of Jamaican and Akan ancestry. I felt right at home in Ghana, not simply because of the apparent congruency between the people, foods, landscapes, languages, and general patterns of life of Jamaica and Ghana, but as the sum total of all the intangibles that link the cultures of the two countries. This sense was also conditioned by my ability to speak Akan (Twi), the region's lingua franca, which I studied on my own and which helped to produce smiles on seemingly kindred faces, lubricated the minds of some to speak with me about issues that mattered to them, and, of course, facilitated my continued study of Akan language and cultural history. On the windy and slightly cold morning of December 24, 2001, a week after I arrived in Takyiman, I wrote the following as my first journal entry:

[The] *akɔmfɔɔ* [spiritualists] and *nnunsinfoɔ* [herbalists] I have spoken with thus far have, for the most part, a high regard for the nature of their work and therefore the type of information they are able and willing to share. As a researcher, this is sort of [a] dilemma since I agree that these specialists should protect their ideas and by extension

those of their ancestors. But it means also that my access to ‘authentic’ information is limited, even in the archives. This limitation is significant for any African history researcher to realize and appreciate, for to truly know and understand indigenous knowledge, thought, practice, and language, one must be able to access those [mechanisms] which archive, protect, and transmit what is indigenous or integral to African societies. In other words, the notions of “fieldwork”, “methodology”, “applied or received theory”, “historiography”, “validity” of ideas or knowledge systems, for instance, all must be re-conceptualized based upon [indigenous knowledge systems]... [I]t seems evident to me that the more we study, the more we come to know of ourselves [and those we study].<sup>4</sup>

As Emil Torday stated, usually, “[t]hese private opinions [do] not make the printed page... nor are they found in the [Africanists’ field notes or publications].”<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to share this journal entry because it reflects the newness of Ghana and so-called field research for me, but also several key issues related to sources, subjects, and subjugation embedded in Ghana and the larger African world.

First, the entry acknowledges the need for respect for the humanity and vocation of my informants (“sources”), even though Ghana’s media and school curricula have not offered this respect. Furthermore, my doing so had the potential to constrain my own research. Second, my respect for research informants enabled me to recognize the layers and subjugation of indigenous knowledge among a range of informants and archival documents, problematize “authentic” information, and work within the silences and disclosures articulated by all these sources. Finally, the historical context and the ways in which the Akan culture bearers (my research “subjects”) moved through oral recounting of their history prompted an important reconsideration of what it meant to do fieldwork, choose, or create appropriate methodology, analyze and evaluate source materials, and the validity of research and its intended and unintended outcomes. These key points formed a kind of “looking-glass” effect where I had to reflect upon and interpret my own knowledge and identity as researcher and a diasporic African, as I simultaneously looked to explore and interpret the same for those individuals and the very questions I researched.

My experiences in Ghana demonstrate that the presence or absence of fundamental respect for informants and those encountered in the documentary sources can often either constrain or facilitate research. For instance, the late Nana Kofi Kyereme became one of my most important and well-versed informants, but his significance to my

research and development was not initially clear. Though Nana Kyereme allowed me to take notes during an informal conversation, he refused a formal interview on the grounds that I also had to be a healer like himself in order to access the knowledge I sought. He demonstrated that as the most senior *ɔkɔmfɔɔ* in Takyiman he was not like others who tell “foreign researchers” what they wanted to hear about a vocation they knew or cared little about.<sup>6</sup> Nana Kyereme was rightfully protective of his knowledge and chose what questions he would entertain and answer, and only permitted limited access to his ideas—his world—in the course of our conversations. He had seen a bevy of researchers come and go during his lifetime who sought to exploit the minds of individuals like himself like a sort of data plantation. Few, as he described, had the decency to greet or thank him in what he regarded as a culturally acceptable manner.

It remains uncertain to me whether Nana Kyereme responded to all researchers as he did to me or if his advanced age at the time of our meeting influenced his response. There is a brief biography of him and a history of his shrine (*ɔbosom*) that was recorded via interviews with Owusu Brempong—a Ghanaian—and Dennis Warren, a white anthropologist, in 1970.<sup>7</sup> During my research in 2002, Nana Kyreme, as a “research subject,” reflected and shared with me the very power relations that shaped his life as well as the content of our conversations. He responded to my inquiries, but had rejected those of most of the scholars who came to him before me.

Why did Nana Kyereme choose to speak with me, considering the fact that he had previous experience with Warren and that he had helped to train the first diasporic African *ɔkɔmfɔɔ* in Takyiman, a personal friend of mine from Trinidad? I have grown convinced that our conversation occurred because I had immersed myself culturally and was, therefore, equipped to approach him in a disarmingly respectful manner. I had scheduled an appointment and provided a copy of the research questions in Twi and English, offered him a drink and informed Nana Kyereme and his *okyeame* (“speech intermediary”) of my mission (*amanneɛ*). In addition, previously I had accepted his decision to decline a formal interview and accepted his condition that I take on his vocation. Having satisfied his protocol, he invited me to converse with him on my research and inquired much about my diasporic African friend, Nana Kwaku Sakyi. Through this initial formal conversation, his vastly superior knowledge of medicine and healing became evident compared to other healers I interviewed, and those that I encountered in the documentary sources.

The explanatory powers of Nana Kyereme as a data source, and a few others of his caliber in the scribal sources, undermined much of the existing anthropological and historical studies on Akan medicine and healing. Sadly, my research project came to a close in May 2004 and, a few months later Nana Kyereme passed away. I include his name when I pour libation (*mpaee*) and he continues to be a source of power and inspiration.

## Research Matters II: Brazil and the Bahamas 2005

My research on Akan history and culture provided a path to rethinking the contours of diasporas. The African diaspora(s) in the Americas is inextricably bounded to the international enslavement enterprise (“slave trade”) and its domestic forms. The slave trade was the primary means through which most diasporic Africans arrived in the Americas and slavery was the institution that contributed directly to cultural change. In 2005, Brazilian president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva traveled to Ghana. On this and several of his other African destinations he made a point to apologize for Brazil’s involvement in the international enslavement enterprise and domestic slavery in Brazil. Lula’s apologies in Africa came, ironically, at time when there were large numbers of “modern slaves” in Brazil, found mostly in the vast Amazon region of northern Brazil.<sup>8</sup> When Lula, as he is commonly known, came to power in 2002, he pledged to abolish these “near-slave” conditions in Brazil. Although his administration has taken some concrete steps, the larger legacy of plantation life for many and paradise for some still pervades Brazilian society, specifically as it relates to diasporic Africans. In 2007, Brazil had the tenth largest economy in the world, but it also had the highest levels of income inequities and wealth disparities, a paradox that is part of a larger cultural mythology of social elasticity and racial harmony often imagined as “racial democracy.”<sup>9</sup> Defined by centuries of plantation, mining, ranching, and urban enslavement using African labor, Brazil’s self-generated image of racial harmony juxtaposed to vast socioeconomic disparities, particularly for a country with the largest African (diasporic) population outside of Nigeria, fits a plantation and paradise metaphor that frames much of the Americas.

Though it does not share Brazil’s layered histories of enslavement, the Bahamas offers another revealing case. It has devoted itself to the myth of the Caribbean as paradise at the expense of plantation living conditions for those black bodies that make that edenic experience

possible.<sup>10</sup> Whether it is the plantation-style Ocean Club resort on Paradise Island in the Bahamas—a 35-acre tourist oasis that offers total seclusion—or the Copacabana beach resort and residential area in southern Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) with scores of clustered *favelas* (“slums”) behind it, the economic polarization and cultural mythology of racial harmony or paradise for both countries—and those in between—have the same point of origin: centuries of plantation life for indigenous and African peoples that made paradise possible for European colonists. It is the continuation of both the context and content of this plantation life in places like Brazil or the Bahamas—and where we are offered “smiling black ‘natives’ chopping open coconuts, ready to serve, ready to please, gesturing with their hands for the viewer to come and join in the [eternal] fun” in advertisements—that those who conduct research among or write about African diasporic peoples must confront.<sup>11</sup>

In Brazil, the Jesuits held some of the largest slaveholding ranches and plantations, an important economic stake in the international enslavement enterprise in Brazil and Angola, and a number of its key members argued vigorously for physical violence against the enslaved as key to social control and for direct links between enslavement and the economic survival of colonial Brazil.<sup>12</sup> The laboring world of Africans in the mining districts, urban centers, or on sugar plantations (*fazendas*) during the nine-month harvest period (*safrá*) where the sugar mills (*engenhos*) were exhaustingly worked from the afternoon until late the next morning differed little for those on Jesuit-owned plantations. On a Jesuit’s plantation in Santa Cruz, scholars have found that enslaved Africans created communities ordered by different quarters for the “upper class” (via brick housing filled with possessions) and “lower class” (via clay housing), marriages according to the rules of society, chose the last names of their owner, and had the possibility of purchasing their freedom through an emancipation letter costing 153,000 *reis*.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, historians can infer “classism” and naming patterns from plantation inventories, letters, and other documentary sources. But these readings—and the silences and subjugation embedded in them—do not tell us much about the interior lives of these Africans. They do not reveal why Maria Izabel was the only enslaved person on the Santa Cruz plantation able to purchase her emancipation letter, which she did on March 14, 1818, or the intentions of and outcomes for enslaved women who married “free” men and enslaved men who did the same with women who had property.

As a part of my own research at the Arquivo Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, I found that the inventory lists and other documents for the Jesuit convent in Vila de São Sebastião, owned by Frei Manoel de São Vicente Ferrer, provided fragmentary and superficial information about Africans' occupation, skin color, age, marital status, family relationships, and valuation in local currency.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the fact that most were married, middle-age field workers, their cultural identities obscured by Portuguese names, spiritual strivings, day-to-day negotiations, health, and the meaning and experience of being labeled *preto* (black) or *criola* (very black) or *pardo* (tan) remain undisclosed. All this complicates rather than elucidate and decreases the interpretative value of scholarship that is less revealing about the meaningful corridors of African diasporic lives.

The fundamental issue here is how historians and others read concerns like dissension, "classism," resistance, spirituality, culture development and deployment, "racial" identity and belonging, and gender from and into the sources. The world they imagine and put into print often reifies the paradise created by the plantations—implicitly yielding to the thesis of Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala*. While I listened to a white female scholar at a conference in Brazil discuss how liberating prostitution was for African women—the iconic *mulatta* and the sensual black women—I then thought about some of those who made this freedom possible: the German and Italian voyeur-men who position their camcorders up the legs of these women at carnival and the tourism industry's exploitation of the climate and African diasporic culture as part of a multinational capitalism that offered *samba*, "sun, sand, sex, smiles, and [the] servility" of dark-skinned persons.<sup>15</sup>

This image of paradise is buttressed by the historic and contemporary labor and composite culture of Afro-Brazilians who form more than 80 percent of all prison inmates, 70 percent of those living below the poverty line, the majority of those in the poorest housing facilities, and the majority of the homeless in Brazil's urban centers, including street children murdered by hired and retired police officers. Further, Brazilians of African descent are made iconic through *samba* lyrics that focus on the *malandro* (smooth-talking hustler) or *mulatta* or *otário* (utterly unintelligent person), and who experience a range of anti-African sentiments in matters of skin color, hair texture, and general aesthetics (e.g., *cattinga*, "body odor [of the African]" and songs like *Nega do cabelo duro*, "black women with hard hair").<sup>16</sup> These caricatures are no different from those ornamental caricatures—that is, *carte de visite* (presentation cards), picturesque figures

carved in wood and other souvenirs of an idealized imperial past—in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Portugal, Brazil, and in postslavery societies within the Americas and some parts of Africa.<sup>17</sup>

For the Bahamas, and not unlike Brazil and the rest of the Americas, the past conditions the present and the present conditions the past in that its local culture developed over centuries is caricatured and performed in the hotels, clubs, carnival and “folk” festivals. They are commodified into exotic entertainment, a colonial past in terms of its plantations, buildings, forts, and dress is preserved to promote nostalgia and a fantasy of the “good old days.” Consequently, people of African descent in Brazil and the Caribbean “have resurrected paradise for the people who invented it, for the people who placed their ancestors in *encomienda*, slavery, and indenture in order to enjoy it.”<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, the largest consumers of the tourism packaged as “paradise” in the Americas and the biggest consumers of an idyllic, imperial past and its ornamental caricatures are one and the same.

This kind of tourism is remarkably similar to efforts in Ghana. In these efforts, most citizens of Ghana see diasporic Africans as tourists and tourism as primarily a path to “development.” They generally are unconcerned with the international enslavement enterprise in their literal and metaphoric “whitening” of the “slave castles” in Cape Coast and Elmina. Diasporic Africans, however, view “the castles as sacred ground not to be desecrated,” and, for them, confronting the castles is confronting lived histories and memories embedded in very real collective experiences.<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that many break down and cry not out of performance or pity but rather out of an equally real need to engage and embrace a history so painful—in order to heal. The contestation between diasporic Africans and the Akan over the meaning of the Elmina castle, for instance, goes beyond a divide between the two. It is rather about vested interests in the interpretation of the restored castle and about whose story should be told: Dutch tourists are interested in the period when the castle was under Dutch rule, British tourists in British colonial rule, Asante persons in the room that housed Nana Agyeman Prempeh I, whom most Ghanaians see as a symbol of resistance to British colonialism, and diasporic Africans in all of these.<sup>20</sup>

## Colonial People, Places, and Publishing

Enslavement and colonialism configured neo-European societies in the Americas and those in Africa. They became racialized social

orders with “ethnic” groups, gender inequities, and mechanisms of sociocultural inclusion and exclusion. In these social arrangements, whites viewed themselves as nonethnic and nonracial and, therefore, they always belong when researching and writing about whomever and wherever Europeans had established slave societies or colonial rule. The research of white scholars in Ghana can be advanced through “chieftaincy” privileges bestowed upon them by those in power when very few Ghanaian scholars—with comparable credentials—are rarely made “development chiefs” in their own country and culture.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to say that white scholars remain unaware of their white privilege in the field and in publishing. On the contrary, they are acutely aware of how such liberties may complicate their work, but they do little to change the power relations that made and make their access to people, places, and publishing possible. For those that do “field research,” there is no consistent method to accurately or even unproblematically represent the power inequities in the field that are rooted in the legacies of imperialism and slavery.

For historians and other scholars whose research staple is not among the living but rather in physical archives and prestigious repositories, there is also the theme of power relations. An immense quantity of dense records, artifacts and material culture, monuments, and even human remains from Africa are found *outside* of Africa in European and North American archives that own, value, and control who can access these objects for research. It is the ultimate rites-of-passage for historians to go to the archives and for the anthropologist to go to the field. Yet, for the historian or anthropologist, these “coming of age” experiences certify both to make careers out of researching and writing about subjugated and silenced peoples. In turn, they present themselves as champions of African interests.<sup>22</sup>

Ivor Wilks’ study of nineteenth-century Asante is a telling example. He attempts to rescue the polity from charges of barbarism and denies its own uniqueness by presenting it in Weberian and Marxist terms, consequently earning a most prestigious Africanists award from the African Studies Association and the label “dean of scholars writing about the Asante of Ghana.”<sup>23</sup> Certainly, we cannot simply reduce the matter of research to white power and African subjugation, but we do need to seriously consider the ubiquity of how unequal and historically situated power relations between African diasporic and (neo-)European societies frame not only our research into an “ethnographic” place or the past but the researcher as well.

From the above perspective, white male historians such as the late John D. Fage could easily declare that when diasporic Africans research the slave trade their projects “have rather little to do with scholarship. Obviously the whole issue of a slave trade across the Atlantic and of slave systems in the New World in which whites did all the exploitation and all the suffering was by blacks must be highly emotive.”<sup>24</sup> Fage and others can research and write African history for he is always emotionally, ideologically, and “ethnically” detached, because he is not one of them. Without such obstructions to “untrammelled scholarship,” he can speak authoritatively for those silenced and subjugated by the very processes that sustained his privileges in Britain and the academic world. Joseph Inikori argues that though sentiments are a part of the slave trade debate in which Fage and Rodney were involved, conceptual confusion and paradigm limitations are central in that debate participants use inappropriate paradigms. Therefore, believing opposing arguments are driven by ideology and emotion.<sup>25</sup> This may be so, but the ways in which this debate has been polarized along racial lines—in that the “opposing arguments” come largely from diasporic Africans—suggests that all scholarship is ideological and, as such, much of the recalcitrant arguments seek to unsettle the image and interests of (neo-)European societies implicated in it.

Though Fage’s remark was directed toward the late Walter Rodney and his “underdevelopment of Africa” thesis,<sup>26</sup> they speak to two issues with which this essay is centrally concerned. The first is the ownership of the very enslavement and resultant colonial enterprises that created paradise and plantation, “Africa” and its contemporary diaspora, and, of course, the invention of the “Americas” and “Europe” since the fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The second is the ways in which scholarship that matters for (diasporic) Africa and not (neo-) European societies are treated in academic discourse. These issues have been addressed to some extent, but I want to further explore the second in my own work and thus return to and close with the Akan and Ghana.

My research project in Takyiman among indigenous healers—and among whom Nana Kofi Kyereme was key—was published as *Indigenous Medicine and Knowledge in African Society* (hereafter, *IMKAS*) in 2007. A year later, one reviewer, a medical anthropologist, offered a critical review that was much in defense of his field and one of his former colleagues, Dennis Warren. I, in turn, responded not in defense of my work but rather to make it clear I that did not write the book to engage in debates about medical anthropology. My

purpose was to provide a more thoughtful perspective on Akan medicine grounded in the ideational and pragmatic world of its practitioners and users, as a means to advance the study and use of indigenous therapeutic resources for Ghana.

In my response to the review, I urged readers to evaluate the book for what it set out to do rather than what it should have done for medical anthropology. Perhaps, the reviewer misread my work the way he did because he is a medical anthropologist who saw it as an affront to the dissertation—and later publications—of another anthropologist, the late Dennis Warren, and, therefore, reduced my book to “a commentary on Warren’s work.” Positioning my work this way made it seem as if I had some preoccupation or obsession with Warren’s work, when, in fact, it was the reviewer who devoted one-third of his review to Warren’s “monumental dissertation.” In my 240-page book, Warren’s published works receive less than a page of treatment. The reviewer charged that I was dishonest about Warren’s reliance on one healer, but, in several instances, Warren himself admitted the baseline data for his dissertation (and later published articles) derived from nearly 1500 “disease names organized into a 12-level taxonomic system expressed by *one* venerated Bono priest-healer [i.e., Nana Kofi Donkor].”<sup>28</sup> To be sure, I was less concerned with Warren’s work for posterity or with personality-driven matters—and I had all reason to as the one who, by invitation, went thoroughly through his entire collection of papers and slides at the University of Iowa and prepared an assessment of it for other scholars.

I noted that the reviewer and others can rest assured that Warren’s place in the field of medical anthropology or African studies and development is not in jeopardy, though his works have been rightfully criticized by Robert Pool, Peter Ventevogel, and others, including myself. A big difference between the former and me is that they are all white (medical) anthropologists and I am not. My scholarship focuses primarily on West African, Akan, and African diasporic history. This distinction is critical because I produced a book that was a contemporary history with a specific and explicit focus on an African therapeutic system as it existed and based stingingly on a reading of various sources, including but not limited to the “ideas” of indigenous healers, each treated as an independent source.

Historians cannot simply create data as others would in the field or in their imagination, but rather use the material (e.g., plants) and each ideational (e.g., medicinal concepts) records available. In my research on healers in Takyiman, each healer was an independent source that

confirmed the salient ideas of others—each clarified or supported by varied archives of Akan cultural knowledge—producing, in the end, a perspective grounded in a composite Akan culture and history. Similar to Ivor Wilks’ study of nineteenth century Asante, Dennis Warren attempted to prove that the Bono had a “scientific” basis to their therapeutic system like us (read “Westerners”). Pool used a village in Cameroon to examine issues not important to that village but to Western medical anthropologists, Ventevogel used the Primary Health Training for Indigenous Healers program to do the same and to fulfill his thesis requirement as a graduate student. None sought to principally ground their study in the culture and language of those studied—which presupposes fluency in both—in ways that these African communities might progressively use the researcher’s findings. My aim was just that: a study anchored in cultural understandings with a pragmatic value for individuals and institutions interested in health and healing in Ghana. I did not write for Western anthropology.

What the reviewer revealed, more than anything else, is the failure of medical anthropology to excavate African perspectives on matters that are actually relevant to African societies. This failure to locate African perspectives on therapeutic matters that may or may not be important concerns is a function of the anthropological quest for “ethnographic cases” that lend themselves to issues in the field of medical anthropology rather than African knowledge and perspectives of the field (i.e., Africa). My book was crafted with the latter cause in mind and if it did not behave the way in which the medical anthropologist desired, I remained unapologetic. Repeatedly, I stated, “The purpose of the research project is to investigate how ‘medicine’ is conceptualized and interpreted based on specialists and archives of indigenous knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> This rather than Warren’s dissertation should have been the benchmark for reviewing my work. In the end, the reviewer claimed I did not prove what he thought was my case, but, as irony and logic would have it, he did not prove his either because he failed to read my work on its own terms and according to what it sought to do. This state of affairs capture much of Akan and African studies in that scholars fail to read African societies on and in their own historically and culturally specific terms.

## Implications for Studying African World History

The issues of historically situated power relations, subjugation, and racialized thinking have profoundly shaped the lives of and research

about African and African diasporic peoples. Although the field of African history has yet to come to terms with these issues, the very meaning and survival of the field in and outside of African and African diasporic societies depends on it. During the cold war era, Africa was annexed into “area studies,” which meant African history was stubbornly bounded to the continent of Africa. This “area studies” approach—financed and framed by the politics of North American and European governments—had fatal consequences.<sup>30</sup>

First, not even all of the continent and its outlying islands were considered “African” though in or contiguous to “Africa,” and the nation-states manufactured in the 1960s became units of analysis unto themselves and without regard to lineages and languages that made nonsense out of the boundaries which those states and the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) reified. Second, if human history is about the experiences of people over time and across space, then the “area studies” approach has sterilized “African history” by conceptually incarcerating it to a fixed geography rather than a focus on its peoples and their historic “diasporas” within and outside of Africa. Lastly, white scholars and African ones under their tutelage have been apt to charge “invention” of traditions, histories, and identities, including but not limited to diasporic Africans claiming (to be) Africa(n), though they have done very little to unambiguously define the intellectual arena in which those charges are made. For purposes of defining a discourse or field of study, what are the pragmatic and intellectual boundaries of the “Africa(n)” in African history or African studies? In other words, the continued debate about what is (and what is not) African studies is one embedded in the unequal power relations between African/African diasporic and (neo-)European societies, and the politics and ordering of knowledge in academia. The very structuring of academia reflects its social order—in that political regimes are usually supported by knowledge regimes—and so African studies had no other fate in the academy than on the margins, nearing dissolution via budget cuts and the politics of relevance in so-called postracial societies.

Between the historic collapse of colonialism and communism, African studies became an epistemological decolonization struggle against marginalization and objectification within the domains of knowledge consolidated into disciplinary formations, but on the fringes of academia and coalesced into “area studies.” African and diasporic African scholars fought to interrogate and reconfigure the paradigms and methods of those formations in and outside of

academia as a knowledge project that organized knowledge in particular ways, so as to shape understandings of Africa in public and intellectual life. The history of African studies at Howard University is one example.<sup>31</sup> But the enduring history of African studies or academic African history is one of whites in Europe and North America establishing the discipline, creating a racialized hierarchy that positioned whites in control of the mechanisms responsible for the production and dissemination of knowledge about Africa.<sup>32</sup>

When this hegemony and the subjugation of African and African diasporic claims to African studies was challenged in 1969, entrenched stakeholders a part of the African Studies Association (ASA) framed the issue as one of “untrammelled scholarly inquiry” with respect to African studies against “black interests” driven by “strong emotion” and “progressive politics.”<sup>33</sup> What was at stake then and, arguably, now? One ASA stakeholder responded, “the future of African studies in the United States.”<sup>34</sup> Since intellectual ownership of a discipline and a continent of now one billion people were also at stake, there was no consolidation of the domains of knowledge or control within African studies but an inevitable fracturing that created various professional organizations and versions of African studies. Interestingly enough, the domain of African history remained with the ASA variant of African studies, so much so that very few scholars in the fields of African American studies, black studies, or Africana studies have seriously engage in African history beyond ancient Egypt.

Framed by silences and subjugation, the power relations between (neo-)European societies and the African world continue to condition research and scholarship on African and African diasporic lives and subjects, and the linkages between Africa and its diasporic communities on one hand and between social orders and the academy on the other. Recent debates surrounding the late Philip Curtin’s 1995 commentary in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or between Henry Louis Gates and Ali Mazrui underscore the very thesis on this essay and help to drive home its central idea. Henry Louis Gates’ *Wonders of the African World* series need no further commentary than what Mazrui and others have provided.<sup>35</sup> The series, however, did show how race and racialized thinking shaped knowledge produced about Africa and the African diaspora and how those attached to “powerful” institutions like Harvard University and a bevy of foundations reproduce the silences and subjugation of African and African diasporic history, even if the mouthpiece of the series was of African descent. We should not confuse the “front man” with those who nurtured

his insanity and allowed for the production and dissemination of a topic—the African world—for which many are acutely misinformed or uninformed.

In Curtin's case, his commentary was an argument also about race and racism in bemoaning "intellectual apartheid" and the "use of racial criteria in filling faculty posts in the field of African history," suggesting a kind of reverse discrimination against those who were white (males) and the hiring of unqualified African and African diasporic scholars.<sup>36</sup> Curtin's former colleague, Jan Vansina, had resigned from the American Historical Association on similar grounds. Was there any merit to Curtin's central claim? In response to Curtin's commentary in the *Chronicle*, Thomas Spear at the University of Wisconsin at Madison—where Curtin is credited with founding African studies—noted that in their 1995 applicant pool for African history and over the past thirty years, 75 percent or more in both categories were white and male—the same as the 1992 membership of ASA based on Spear's informal survey.<sup>37</sup> The increasing numbers of African scholars intellectually and physically migrating to (neo-)European societies may have troubled Curtin and perhaps Vansina even more, which would be ironic for both have presented themselves as champions of African studies and interests. The respective memoirs of Vansina and Curtin were aptly titled, *Living with Africa* and *On the Fringes of History*.<sup>38</sup> For the historical study of the African world, we can only begin to move it from the fringes of history and academia when we define this knowledge project as a global endeavor fixed on people (rather than geography) and locate the project in (diasporic) African societies as an epistemological decolonization tool against silencing, subjugation, and intellectual outsourcing. Toward that end, scholars and scholarship on (diasporic) Africa have much to do with creating the conditions for concrete shifts in power relations and approaches that balance how we (re)assess and access an expanding African world.

## The Power of Sources and the Sources of Power

The respect that I showed Nana Kyereme and others in the course of my research in Takyiman allowed me to further understand the layers of indigenous knowledge and processes of localized knowledge production, the problematic of seeking "authentic" information, and the limits of all sources in the context of the society that produce them. This included the silences and disclosures articulated by them.

Anthropological and historical knowledge produced through and on African subjects in the past half-a-millennium was and is still a negotiated knowledge created at the confluence of researcher, interpreter, and informant, though often presented—in print form—under single authorship. Much of this knowledge, however, was brokered by specific interests and shaped by the power relations inherent in each encounter.

In colonial Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), for example, much of the early European accounts used local informants in varying degrees. It remains difficult to discern the “African voices” in the text or subtext of those narratives. The power of reducing reality to writing and publishing it for a market that consumed exoticism and the spectacle of “blackness” was beyond the control of the African informant. The limits of subject power outside the local context remains the case, arguably, today. Ray Kea argues that “it is not farfetched therefore to consider many of the documentary sources African ‘texts’ which were transmitted through the letters, reports, accounts, etc. of Europeans.”<sup>39</sup> In most cases, a limited number of brokers and merchants were the key informants in these documentary sources. It was primarily men who engaged in commerce in the Gold Coast, and with competing interests, values, and intentions, but the details of which, including their identities and relations, remain, with very few exceptions, undisclosed. Whatever voice they have in these “African texts,” they do not speak for the larger population in and beyond the coastal enclaves—spheres of localized knowledge existed among a cross-section of peoples and none of which merchants or office-holders monopolized.<sup>40</sup> Invariably, whether Africans or Europeans produce a source, neither is more or less authentic. They pose similar challenges: each is usually produced by and for members in their respective societies. Scholars must examine both oral and written sources with due consideration of their contexts and intended audiences.

African studies is a product of European imperialism that was not reinvented during the spirit of nationalism and decolonization of the 1960s. Therefore, the methodologies and theories that dominate African studies are steeped in the various disciplines that had literally written Africa and Africans out of history and marginalized them as the uncivilized, barbarous, and inferior. My experience grappling with the historical context and the ways in which Akan culture bearers (“subjects”) presented Akan history prompted me to reconsider what it means to conduct fieldwork, examine appropriate methodology, and strategies to interpret source material, none of which speaks for

themselves. In the last half-century, unfortunately, little headway has been made in the development of “home grown” methods and theories within African studies or history. For instance, the ongoing debate over the value of written and oral sources for Akan or African studies is an artificial one. At its core is the more fundamental issue of power relations in the academic production of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Oral history, and the methods associated with it, remains central to these relations.

Jan Vansina, author of *Oral Traditions as History*, argues that the “weakness in chronology is one of the greatest limitations of all oral traditions.” Yet he fails to consider whether the “weakness in chronology” is not inherent to a chronology concept rooted in the Georgian calendar rather than in a number of African calendrical systems that organize time and the narratives or events that accompany it quite differently.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the Akan have had a calendrical system of their own since their earliest presence in the documentary sources, but this fact remains neglected in the recording of Akan history. Be that as it may, historians have deemed Vansina’s text groundbreaking and have accepted it widely, while ignoring his neglect of the ways in which African societies mark and measure time and ascribe meaning to their historical events.

Similar to Vansina’s work, what we encounter in the theses, dissertations, refereed journal articles, and books that come out of fieldwork or archival research in the African context is not really “African history” but rather a kind of African history through European optics that become consumed and hailed by scholars in Europe, North America, and in African universities. Such histories are produced by individuals attached to “powerful” academic and publishing institutions outside of Africa. Indeed, as Jonathan Reynolds noted in a contribution to the H-Africa discussion network, “Despite [the Africanists’] idealized self-image as selfless seekers of knowledge, the political economy of how knowledge is produced follows market forces not unlike those found in the private sector. We seek capital investment for research. We use those funds to acquire raw materials during fieldwork. That fieldwork is often funded by capital-rich Western institutions and is facilitated by cheap African labor. Once the material is ‘mined,’ we retire to our Western institutions to refine it. Finally, we strike deals with Western publishers to manufacture it into articles and monographs.”<sup>43</sup>

These key points regarding research, power relations, and knowledge production formed a “looking-glass” effect where I had to reflect upon and interpret my own knowledge and identity as

researcher and a diasporic African, as I simultaneously looked to explore and interpret the same for those individuals and the very topics I researched. From this perspective, one of the most significant revelations, at least to me, was the vast amount of detailed ethnographic and historical information available on Asante (the Kingdom of Asante) and people of Ghana *after* the British conquered them and placed them under imperial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Between Carl Christian Reindorf's self-published *History of the Gold Coast and Asante* in 1889 and Ivor Wilks' reprint of *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* in 1989, a larger body of literature was created on Asante than any other West African society. However, noticeably *after* the British invaded Asante in 1874, European missionaries began to establish posts outside of Kumase, the Asante capital, in the late 1870s, and the protracted civil war that crippled Asante between 1884 and 1888. Prior to Reindorf's book, very few texts—rather than the reports and correspondences between Asante and British, Dutch, and Muslim merchants—focused on Asante at all.

In fact, it was these aforementioned processes punctuated by British annexation and placement under its protectorate scheme that gave individuals like Robert S. Rattray and Margaret J. Fields—British colonial anthropologists whose “research” bolstered British indirect rule—unfettered access to subjugated peoples. Rattray traveled extensively to areas formerly under Asante control. Although he was no historian by training or temperament, his collected works on the Asante are still considered “a monument of colonial ethnography and manifestly a major source” for Asante and Akan studies.<sup>44</sup> The unequal power relations between Britain and its colonies transformed the cultures and peoples of what is now Ghana into subjects and sources to be mined and re-mined—a process sustained by Peace Corp volunteers, NGO workers, thesis and dissertation seekers, study abroad participants, multinational corporations, and others too numerous to name. The very nature of power relations between (neo-)European societies and African ones still conditions the present and frames research in Africa or its worldwide diasporic communities, particularly those in the Americas.

## Notes

1. Benjamin Nimer, “Politics and Scholarship in African Studies in the United States,” *African Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (1970): 353–61.

2. On the quest for aggregate numbers among “slave trade” scholars, see Philip D. Curtin, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); Paul E. Lovejoy, “The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of African History* 30 (1989): 365–94; David Henige, “Measuring the immeasurable: The Atlantic slave trade, West African population and the Pyrrhonian critic,” *Journal of African History* 27 (1986): 295–313; David Eltis, “The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2001): 17–46; David Eltis et al., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and online at <http://www.slavevoyages.org>.
3. See Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1999), 374.
4. Field notes: *Takyiman Journal*, December 24, 2001 entry.
5. The quote refers to Emil Torday and his “ethnographic” research. See John Mack, *Emil Torday and the Art of the Congo, 1900–1909* (London: British Museum Publications, 1990), 36.
6. Nana Kofi Kyereme. Interview by author. Takyiman Township, Ghana, December 13, 2002.
7. D. M. Warren and K. O. Brempong, *Techiman Traditional State, pt. II, Histories of the Deities* (Legon, Ghana: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1971), 67–70.
8. Nick Caistor, “Brazil’s ‘Slave’ Ranch Workers,” *BBC News* May 11, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4536085.stm> (accessed September 23, 2009); Osha Gray Davidson and Andre Lambertson, “In The Land Of Slavery,” *Rolling Stone* 982 (2005): 74–80; Kevin Bales, *Disposable People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), chap. 4, esp. 125–35; Pat Marrin, “Brazilian Poor Used as Slaves, Bishop Charges,” *National Catholic Reporter* 33, no. 40 (1997): 13; Jack Epstein, “Slavery Nags Brazil as it Moves Ahead,” *Christian Science Monitor* 87, no. 166 (1995): 1.
9. Hebe Maria Mattos de Castro, *Das Cores do Silêncio os Significados da Liberdade no Sudeste escravista—Brasil Século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro: Arquivo Nacional, 1995), 401–5.
10. Ian Gregory Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation: Tourism and Culture in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 1–2, 92.
11. *Ibid.*, 1.
12. See Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *O Trato dos Videntes: Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul, Séculos XVI e XVII* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000); David Sweet, “Black Robes and Black Destiny: Jesuit Views of African Slavery in seventeenth Century Latin America,” *Revista de Historia de America* 86 (1978): 87–133; Paulo de Assunção, “A Escravidão nas Propriedades Jesuíticas entre a Caridade Cristã e a Violência,” *Acervo* 15, no. 1 (2002): 128–9.
13. Carlos Engemann, “Corrqueiro como nascer e morrer: Práticas sociais e parentesco em Santa Cruz, Rio de Janeiro (1791–1817),” *Acervo* 15, no. 2 (2002): 89, 91, 98.

14. Arquivo Nacional (Rio de Janeiro), Arquivo a Ordem do Carmo, listagem sumaria, microfilme 13.0.77, fundo a ordem do carmo, codigo 51, n.d. This document was found in the private papers of Joaquim Clemente. I was told by archivists at the Arquivo Nacional that there are no documents of (diasporic) Africans in Brazil in their own words. While researching African diasporic communities such as the Siddis in India, I was also told by the archivist at the National Archives of India in New Delhi that “we could not locate any document in our holdings on African Communities in India.” J. M. Jareda, personal communication to the author, April 10, 2007.
15. Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation*, 2.
16. On these songs, see Kia Lilly Caldwell, “‘Look at Her Hair’: The Body Politics of Black Womanhood in Brazil,” *Transforming Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (2004): 18–20, 27.
17. For Portugal, see, for instance, *Os Negros em Portugal—sécs. xv a XIX* (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, 1999), 211. Many of these figurines and souvenirs can be found in the Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro.
18. Strachan, *Paradise and Plantation*, 2.
19. Edward M. Bruner, “Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora,” *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 2 (1996): 291.
20. *Ibid.*, 293–4.
21. On “development chiefs” in Ghana, see Susan Benson, “Connecting with the Past, Building the Future: African Americans and Chieftaincy in southern Ghana,” *Ghana Studies* 6 (2003): 109–133; George M. Bob-Milliar, “Chieftaincy, Diaspora and Development: The Institution of Nkosuohene in Ghana,” *African Affairs* 108, no. 433 (2009): 541–58.
22. Oyekan Owomoyela, “With friends like these . . . A critique of pervasive anti-Africanisms in current African studies epistemology and methodology,” *African Studies Review* 37 (1994): 97.
23. A. Norman Klein, “Slavery and Akan Origins?” *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 4 (1994): 627; Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); T. C. McCaskie, “Empire State: Asante and the Historians,” *Journal of African History* 33, no. 3 (1992): 467–76; Isichei, *African Societies*, 15, 17.
24. J. D. Fage, “African Societies and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” *Past and Present* 125, no. 1 (1989): 97.
25. Joseph E. Inikori, “Ideology versus the Tyranny of Paradigm: Historians and the Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on African Societies,” *African Economic History* 22 (1994): 37–8.
26. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981).
27. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 74–75, 113.
28. See, for instance, Dennis M. Warren, “Disease, Medicine, and Religion among the Techiman-Bono of Ghana: A Study in Culture Change,” (Ph diss.,

- Indiana University, 1974), v; idem, "The Role of Emic Analysis in Medical Anthropology: The Case of the Bono of Ghana," *Anthropological Linguistics* 17, no. 3 (1975): 118–19. Emphasis added.
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