White Matters: When, Where, and How?

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The author reflects on the qualitative research process as both a first-time researcher and as a white woman doing research on African American men. This includes reflections on the assumption that the primary motivation for the researcher is romantically motivated, a discussion of racist sexism, and the nature of qualitative evidence, in particular that collected in a cross-race researcher-participant relationship. The research process and experience reinforces the importance of considering the context of the research when thinking about insider-outsider positionality.

"Is your boyfriend/fiancé/husband black?" If they don't work it into their first conversation with me, I learn in later conversations that it was the first thing they wanted to ask upon learning about the work that I do. "They" being friends, family members, strangers, students, teachers, and colleagues. It does not surprise me anymore, considering that was in fact my mother's first response when I told her I was picking up a black studies minor to supplement my less-than-satisfying undergraduate journalism major. Hers was really a considerably more positive response than I have subsequently received from many others of her generation. "Oh, I just figured you'd end up married to one of those rich football players," she said. The truth is my significant other (boyfriend, fiancé, and now husband) could not be any whiter unless he was me. This incredibly common response was just one of many things I had to think about in approaching my first major research project on the influence of black Greek membership on the undergraduate experience of African American men.[1] Why, when a white woman does express an interest in black men, is the first response that she must have a sexual interest in them, and why would this interest apparently be a perfectly acceptable justification to the inquirer, a seemingly gendered difference that also appears in the social science research (Goode 2002)? The intersection of my racial and gender identity with that of my research participants formed a core part of my reflections in the process of conducting what would become

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my thesis research project and encompassed more than these original romantic and sexual considerations. These issues are particularly important in light of the history and politics of white social scientists conducting research on individuals and communities of color (Harding 1993; Kelley 1997), a probably more appropriate context for understanding my own feelings in the field.

I should start by saying that just because the issue of cross-race romantic relationships preoccupied *me* does not mean any of my interviewees seemed concerned at all. In reflection, I think a large part of that was due to their awareness (arrogant, matter-of-fact, or frustrated, depending on the person) that they were, by any definition, hot property on campus, and the fact that my interest in them might be more than academic either did not cross their minds or did not come as a surprise. I did find a few of them attractive and continue to have a great admiration that might border on infatuation for the group as a whole. They are all handsome, smart, fun, easygoing but ambitious guys who enjoy each other's company and make others feel at ease.

Three things inform this specific piece: the research diary I kept as part of the research process, my major professor's reaction upon reading that diary, and my continued interaction with the men I interviewed after the completion of the project. After reading the diary, my major professor (who, significantly, is an African American man who writes primarily about the social construction of race and its significance in daily interaction; see May 2001) sent me the following e-mail.

> Hey Stephanie, I just read your journal and concluded that this is the exact kind of stuff I'm talking about in terms of reflection. . . . The intersection of race and gender in this research is profoundly interesting. Readers want to know why this "White Girl" is doing all of this. Your journal reveals the unsteadiness of your position. Not only as a researcher studying the other but as a beginning sociologist. Take me seriously on this one as you get your more formalized stuff together. Have a good day.

The unsteadiness he refers to is revealed in my very first journal entry, where I attempted to justify myself to critics on whether I should do the research and thought about what I could be looking for in examining these organizations.

> 1/8/01—Thinking about the project and why I should do it. Why should I study Black Greek males? Shouldn't it be at least a Black male? What info will I get or not get that a black male would or wouldn't get? But I do have a Greek experience in common and an investment (emotional, at least) in the future of these organizations. If not me then who? Will certain important audiences hear it better or be more likely to hear it coming from me? I want to go there—I see so many others getting it wrong, missing the point. But I'm so white but what is white? Certainly—my attitudes are not white—not that of the meta-zeitgeist of white superiority/black inferiority.

What is white and what forms does it take in interaction? Is it ever possible to overcome skin color in interaction? If whiteness is "done" through interaction, can you be white and not "do" whiteness? The question of interracial relationships is really just the most dramatic (or salacious, considering the historical justification of

violence against black men based on accusations of sexual contact with white women; Tolnay and Beck 1995) of questions about doing cross-race research. In this piece, there are questions and reflections that run the gamut of this issue and include concerns about methodology, ethics, validity, and the meaning of evidence in a cross-race research endeavor. I begin by exploring the issue of sexual interest in more depth, then talk more about the broader issues that really troubled me through the course of doing the research, and finally consider how my own feelings about doing cross-race research continue to evolve.

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS—THE RACE AND GENDER OF IT ALL

My own feelings on interracial dating have always been a little complicated and are always in flux, and I'm going to ask you *not* to automatically make a color-blind racist diagnosis here (Bonilla-Silva 2003), for although it certainly and unfortunately still fits in some aspects of my life, I do not think this is one of them. I can identify some "white hesitance" in my past romantic interactions. Nonetheless, my feelings probably fit more with the description of feelings about interracial relationships within the black community that Frankenberg (1993) describes in a footnote of her book, *White Women, Race Matters,* in particular something she describes as "racist sexism" and something that I think goes seriously undertheorized in Bonilla-Silva's (2003) otherwise powerful book, *Racism without Racists.* Frankenberg (1993:272) describes racist sexism as something that "shapes standards of physical attractiveness in the culture and constructs white women as more attractive than women of color, both to white and nonwhite men." As both a social scientist and a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white woman who benefits from that standard, it would be bizarre and myopic of me not to be aware of this issue. Frankenberg (1993) also considers the arguments in support of same-race relationships within communities of color—to strengthen community, to emphasize self-valuing in contrast to negative images and stereotypes within the dominant group.

In Bonilla-Silva's (2003) book in which he explores the rhetorical strategies of color-blind racists, all the whites he identifies as racial progressives are lower to lower-middle-class women whom he puts in that group in part because of their personal support and participation in interracial relationships. What is the problem with that? Well, the one male who in a footnote he identifies as supporting interracial relationships is described as actually "exoticizing" Asian American women, which is not exactly the same, as he notes. I will see interracial dating as a sign of racial progressiveness if and when white men are as likely to see and choose African American women as potential life and romantic partners, as white women are African American men. Of course, even this feeling has been complicated by my reading of Dalmage's (2004) piece on interracial relationships where she discusses whether the lack of black woman/white man interracial relationships is more about the choices of black women (still a gendered phenomenon operating here, however).

At an interpersonal level I know that people fall in love, and supporting their freedom to love whomever they want is the "progressive" thing to do. However, I think ignoring the systemic aspects of this phenomenon, which perpetuate longstanding traditions for a gender double standard is a disservice to our sociological analysis of the issue. I recently read Massey et al.'s (2003) discussion of the "tyranny of demography" on college campuses in which he mentions the very skewed gender ratios among African Americans on the college campuses in their sample (which is one of the reasons I came to be interested in my particular research topic). Massey and his colleagues (2003) speculate that these ratios, in which there are many more African American women on campus than African American men, leave African American women with several choices, one of which is dating and marrying more outside their own race. I am not quite as optimistic as Root (2004) that changing gender ratios will automatically lead to higher intermarriage for African American women. In discussing the antimiscegenation laws in America's past, Frankenberg includes a quote from work by Peggy Pascoe that describes the uneven application of these laws depending on the racial and gender composition of the relationship.

> Laws were applied most stringently to groups like Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, whose men were thought likely to marry white women [on the West Coast]. They were applied least stringently to groups like Native Americans (who were inconsistently mentioned in the laws) and Hispanics (who were not mentioned at all), groups whose women were *historically likely to marry white men*. (Frankenberg 1993:76, my emphasis)

This is not a benign fact to me, but something that carries some significant race and gender connotations, and while it's no longer currently embedded in the law, it continues to be normatively present in contemporary patterns of interracial marriage (Wu 2004). Perhaps I've read too much Hill-Collins (e.g., 1991) and Hooks (1981), but when we discuss interracial dating as a benign phenomenon that reveals a commitment to racial progressiveness, it is at the risk of ignoring both who continues to be most negatively impacted by the practice as it is actually existing in our culture and the way that racism is a "system of material relationships with a set of ideas linked to and embedded in those material relationships" (Frankenberg 1993:70). The negative impact of these patterns is also something I have seen painfully expressed by my own students. This was, in fact, something that I discussed with my major professor when I was working on the thesis research project and trying to contact fraternity members to get interviews. He was going to a social gathering held by the fraternity at a local downtown nightspot and I asked if I could accompany him so that he could introduce me to a few of the guys in a more informal setting. His response was something along the lines of "be careful; if the black women on this campus see this white woman at one of their parties you will face some hostility from them because they'll think you're on the prowl and I'm not sure you want to deal with that." I cannot say with certainty that he was right in his supposition. But I appreciated his willingness to at least name it.

I have also long been troubled by the historical lack of accountability for white women's role in creating an environment where black men were regularly lynched with the justification of "protecting white womanhood" (Tolnay and Beck 1995). The murder of Emmett Till is just one of many examples. The two men who did the killing were acquitted, and that was a terrible injustice. But they would never have gone to Mose Wright's house looking for "the boy" if the wife of one of the men had not come home fired up about the "nerve of some black boy" whistling at her. When I think about that woman and her complicitness in that death, I get very angry and I take seriously the concerns of families in the black community who fear for the safety of their sons if they date a white woman. If I take these issues seriously, does this mean not dating black men makes me a racist? I am able to name some of it as that. But I do not think it is that simple.

Finally, that this is the diagnosis so many people make upon learning of my interest in African American history and in racial justice gives me pause for one other major reason. Perhaps it is what people assume because it has been their experience in the past that this is usually the case. Nonetheless, it seems to imply to me that the only logical reason people (on both sides of the color line) can come up with for a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white woman to want to spend time worrying about racial injustice is if she is actually paying the price for racism in this most intimate and personal way. I do *not* think that is an illegitimate reason to do this kind of work. However, I strongly believe that the costs of racism for white people are high enough, whether or not we are in interracial relationships, to motivate us to work for positive change and not just sit around saying, "I'm not racist, it's not my fault and not my problem."

To summarize, as it is currently often practiced, I think much interracial dating, especially the kind that people generally assume I engage in, reveals racist sexism by ignoring how gendered it tends to be and that this gender aspect tends to be highly undertheorized by many race scholars. It also often fails to consider the legitimate concerns of communities of color, both for solidarity and safety. With Wu, I believe that "if intermarriage and the mixed race movement are to live up to the optimistic claims that they are the future of race relations, they must hold out a greater promise than that some individuals can make a good match and a few individuals are able by themselves to ascend to whiteness" (Wu 2004:562). Ultimately, however, as I pointed out above, the men I interviewed for this project were much less concerned about what my romantic intentions toward them were than the rest of the world seems to be. In the next section, I'd like to explore the actual research project in more depth and what issues, including wrestling with my own racism, were significant.

EXPLORING THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Most of my specific interest in black issues was developed in college. My undergraduate university is a large, flagship state institution, much like the one I attended for graduate school. I noticed (and was troubled by, like many of my own students)

early on in my college career the segregation by race of public spaces like the student union and the existence of separate student organizations for minority students, including a black Greek system.

My sophomore year I volunteered to serve on a committee composed of and chaired by representatives from the three Greek systems. After my first year as a member, I served as the white sorority chair for the next two years. Through this involvement I worked closely with two men—Tom, who was the representative of the predominantly white fraternities, and Winton, who was the representative of the historically black fraternities and sororities (all names are pseudonyms). We planned several events in an attempt to get the three systems together, with varying success. I, however, learned a lot about the structure and functioning of the black Greek system through this involvement and my interactions and conversations with the other chairs.

It was also during my sophomore year that I met Dr. Mark Jefferson, a diversity trainer from the Northeast who would become a mentor of mine. Dr. Jefferson was a member of a black Greek organization, and on one of his several visits to campus, I arranged for the local chapter members to meet us for drinks at a local bar. Looking back, I remember most (and am embarrassed by) how I naively picked a downtown bar that I often frequented, without giving a thought to the fact that I rarely saw any African Americans there. Neither Dr. Jefferson nor any of the members, many of whom I knew from other campus organizations, said anything about my choice. Maybe it was not a big deal. But it certainly reveals how invisible race can be for a white person.

When I started graduate school, I noticed the same thing about the campus segregation. I went to a racism panel early in the year, and one of the most compelling student panelists was, surprise, surprise, a fraternity man. He needed volunteers for the desegregation celebration (fortieth anniversary of the desegregation of the campus), and I signed up. I met another fraternity member through my discussion groups. He told me he appreciated how I ran my class, and one time I asked him why he was so dressed up on Monday (fraternity brothers dress up for chapter meeting on Mondays).

Getting interview subjects was probably the most stressful and nerve-racking hurdle of doing the project, and I spent a lot of time reflecting both on this process and what made it so difficult, as well as what I thought the men might be thinking of me. I don't think this is unusual for any qualitative researcher, but the difficulty may be accentuated by the race and gender differences between me and my potential interviewees. After I finally got the first interview, I had major doubts about my qualifications as a researcher and my skills in conducting interviews, especially about proving my legitimacy, whatever that means, to the interview subjects and whether I was actually doing "sociology."

> Finally, I got to interview Michael. He is always so friendly, with a hug and a smile. I'm not sure we know each other well enough for that but it seems to sort of be his campus persona so I guess I'm flattered to be included in that.

> The interview went well although I kept inserting so many stories about myself as a way to increase my credibility in his eyes. I just kept thinking, if he knows I know this and he sees that I read this, he will like, trust, relate to me. Understand that I am genuine, sincere, whatever. Certainly not neutral. What does this mean for my project? How do I be a good sociologist? Is that even what I want to be? Power of self-definition again, but aren't I being a little egotistical to think I have the knowledge to define myself as a sociologist who falls outside of the established professional norms? Will I be able to do good work and by whom will it be defined as good work?

The attempt to establish myself as knowledgeable to build credibility is a common phenomenon for qualitative researchers. I transcribed this interview almost immediately after it was completed and became uncomfortably aware of just how much I was talking. Recognizing it, I worked hard to correct this mistake in the rest of the interviews, although it often was a conscious effort. However, because I do not know any other way to interview, I still offered a lot of my own stories during the interviews. I did attempt to create an interview environment "in which two or more persons creatively and openly share experiences with one another in a mutual search for greater self-understanding" (Denzin 1989:43) by providing self-disclosure about my own experiences as they related to the interview topics. This was an attempt to avoid creating a unidirectional interview atmosphere that was authoritarian and exploitative in nature (Denzin 1989; Kirsch 1999).

The question of neutrality and/or bias was and is one that I continue to struggle with. I take inspiration from the writings of Lincoln, specifically a paper she prepared on the nature of qualitative evidence (2002). She argues that what is convincing evidence depends upon your perspective. Of course the difficulty with that is if you are convinced but no one else is, what exactly have you accomplished? In writing up my work I have attempted to circumvent this question by including long and large amounts of excerpts from the actual interview text. Even then, I had questions about the validity of what was being communicated to me because of my race and gender. As I continued to attempt to get interviews, I attended several fraternity events. This led to increasing comfort and access but was never an easy process.

> So—it's [fraternity] week [a weeklong series of events sponsored by the organization]. Time to get involved, meet the guys, show my face and build a presence. I'm nervous all the time. Monday night I have the wrong building for the program and the room reserved in Tate [the student union] is never used. So frustrating and I have so much to do. Tuesday night, sports trivia at Ref's. I go and see the guys, wave at Michael who comes to sit at my table, good I won't have to sit alone. Steven comes in and hugs me. So great that he does this because it's nice and also because the guys see that two of their own accept me. Kevin gets interested in Steven and I's conversation (I know the founder who was a National president, again trying to use my previously gathered knowledge to present myself as a sincere and knowledgeable outsider). I *am* a sincere and knowledgeable outsider but I am also very aware of using this as a strategy to gain entry. The guys are all sooo nice and really seem to enjoy each other's company. . . . I get some interviews scheduled but no one seems to know what I'm about, they are

> still wary. Funny, but Jake intimidates me at this stage [a member who would later become one of the men I felt closest to].

After my less-than-successful outing the night before, I was even more nervous about going into the field.

> Wednesday, okay it's a panel on the two Greek systems, interesting but I am so tired and don't want to attend another event. I go anyway and am sitting there nervous and uncomfortable even though several of the guys have greeted me warmly on my way in. Talk to Sara, who I later learn is Steven's girl. She is so beautiful and seems so comfortable that I am intimidated but want to be her friend and think she could like me and also give me some insight on the guys. The guy I know to be the new [student body] president approaches and asks me to participate in the panel, as their "white Greek girl" has failed to show. I am so nervous I can feel my heart beating in my throat. Why do I get so nervous when I am so used to public speaking? I talk about [my sorority] and tell the story of the Q-dogs [a black Greek organization] who lived next door but feel I may be saying too much and sounding condescending or know-it-all-ish so I try to tone it down. Jake is one panel member, much less intimidating tonight. Everyone is awesome at the end and more than willing to do interviews. I feel like now I am known by the chapter as "that girl who helped us out on the panel" and that they will return the favor with cooperation. I enjoyed doing the panel and don't feel it was much to do but it did make me feel more comfortable.

After doing this "favor" I was concerned about whether I had created a sense of obligation among the chapter members but was so glad to actually be getting some interviews that I did not let it stop me. Again, this is probably something I was much more conscious of than they ever were. I do believe that because so many of the men I ended up interviewing were at this panel, my insider "Greek" status became a common experience around which we could relate. This commonality may be particularly salient on a college campus, where Greek students (both black and white) are sometimes, correctly or incorrectly, perceived in a negative way by the rest of the student body. Anyway, the actual interviews started coming much more quickly.

> The next day I get three interviews in a row and David calls Thomas from the office to get him to schedule one. I like each guy as much as the last. This is definitely a problem, surely I'm not being at all objective and people are just going to laugh at this work, like "join the fan club honey but you aren't a sociologist." But plenty of the works we have read in Qual [I was taking a qualitative methods class at the time] have the authors describing the friendships they develop with the participants, maybe I'm okay. On this day, Jake tells me I am the first white person to try to join the fold and I think he means it as a compliment. It reminds me of Dr. J [a mentor of mine] saying he could talk to me like I wasn't a white person. I take such pride in that but what does it really mean?

The comment that I approach issues of race in a way that is different from most white people is one I have heard from several friends and colleagues of color that I respect. It always means a lot to me and also always makes me question what that means. Because what *does* it mean to be white and to think and talk about race?

How am I different from other white people, if that is true? How did I get here from where I started? What will I never be able to understand about being a person of color from my position of privilege? Is it insulting to even try? Or is it necessary? Can a white person ever not "be white"? Sometimes I think it's possible, but as the privileges associated with whiteness are often mostly about being able to *not* have to think about something, I'm not sure it really matters. These are questions I still do not have answers to, although I continue to explore them.

> Friday I do one interview with Thomas and give him a copy of my paper from undergrad [on black Greek organizations], is that a good call? I think it will make him appreciate and understand where I am coming from.

By giving Thomas a copy of previous work, I think I was inadvertently trying to get feedback from him on what questions he thought I might be missing. I later learned that encouraging this type of collaboration is a welcome part of a feminist model of engaging in research (Kirsch 1999) but at the time felt I had somehow stepped over the invisible line separating researcher/participants. That entry continues,

> David sees me in Tate and comes to shake my hand. I have to admit I like being friendly with the [student government] power duo. Feels like I'm back in college again. I am so proud of these two, like they are my relatives or something, they are going to do such a good job and are such good examples for the relatively closed-minded students on this campus.

The feeling that I can somehow vicariously take pride in the accomplishments of people of color is also something I regularly struggle with. It is potentially a manifestation of the "wannabe" syndrome that many whites working in antiracism experience (Howard 1996). Scholars and multicultural educators have argued that black students need to be informed about black history so that they can be proud of their heritage and empowered to achieve because they have role models (Alridge 2000). I believe all students need to learn about the history of all Americans so that we are better equipped to understand the present. However, I have also always felt proud of African American history as more quintessentially American in the "struggle against difficult circumstances to achieve" mythology of our country. And I'm nervous to admit this in a mixed-race setting. Do I have a right to be proud of a history that I do not share based on race? What about the guilt I share based on my continued experience of race privilege because of the history of extreme racism in this country? Can I feel both at the same time? More questions I do not have answers to.

To return to that original question, throughout the interviews I do feel the presence of the "jungle fever" diagnosis as a specter looming over my shoulder but again from my own thoughts and not because it was mentioned by any of the men I interviewed.[2] I hate it. I hate the *term* jungle fever. I *really* hated that movie. But I feel it nonetheless. The following diary entry reveals some of my reflections on this.

> I mention my age difference a lot, maybe to set myself apart as I know I look and act very close to their age. I also tell each I am bringing my fiancé to the cookout,

> to add to the idea that I just like them, I'm not on the prowl? This hasn't seemed to be an issue, as it did in previous experiences. Maybe it is the age.

The issue also came up with my final interview, a guy who was in education and who, like my younger sister, taught social studies. I felt like I was crossing some invisible line by thinking they would make a good match because I would be ignoring all those very things I explored in the first section of this article.

> Last interview. I wish I could set him up with my little sister. Seriously. I know that would be wrong (can't tell you quite why) but he had such an incredible sense of why and how he wanted to live his life and it was so touching.

This next reflection is really the one that I think is most difficult for any researcher doing cross-race research—the omnipresence of race and racist socialization in America (Roediger 2002). At the cookout mentioned above, I spent a lot of time feeling very existential. One of the frustrating and compelling things about race in our society is that it is always there, adding another layer to our interactions, particularly cross-race interactions (Best 2003). So even if I feel connected to the people I am interacting with at a personal level that feels like it supersedes racial categories, I can still picture how the interaction looks to other observers. And I wonder at how my racist training and socialization continue to intervene in ways I fail to recognize in my thoughts and feelings about the men I am interviewing and interacting with. This creates all sorts of reactions, including questions about the validity of my research.

> So, Saturday to the cookout with [my husband]. I'm nervous again. Would feel better if I wasn't arriving empty-handed. The music is loud and it smells great as we approach. All the guys I know are immediately friendly and welcoming but I wish they had some tables or something. Why am I continually amazed at how nice they all are? Is that because I'm surprised that a group of young black men could be so much like my own sorority sisters? To my credit (and part of my white habitus, I suppose), I don't hang around young black men a lot and have a lot of crap coming at me that tries to make me think otherwise. Still, I'd think I'd be beyond that. I'm not going to mention it as much. But they are sooo nice, beyond whatever stereotypes might be in operation. It's amazing that [the fraternity] brings them all together. And hanging around each other just reinforces the values they all bring to the table. They are like a big group of all the close black male friends I have had in my life—Gary, Steve, Adam. Why the hell is there still such a problem with this? How many amazing, nice, intelligent guys does there have to be for the world to get the picture? Makes me crazy but they all seem to take it in stride. No angry black men so far, although Jake's pretty awesome. Some are willing to talk race more than others but they all seem somehow above it. Is that because I'm a white person? The Cose [1993] and race-watching phenomenon that they don't want to share those things with a white person because it's not the image they want to put forth? So what does this mean for my evidence?

I continued to think about this later in the project, when the interviews were complete and I reflected back on them.

> Still very much aware of not being critical enough, having had [one of my advisors] point it out again. But can't you be too critical and should you really go in looking for flaws? Has to be some sort of balance that I'm not finding yet. And too, is critical like a "separatist, I'm the superior scientist" stance? Is that why I shy away from it? People often mention whether or not I can buy what they said to me. But if they said it, even if it's not the whole, unvarnished truth, isn't it important nonetheless because they constructed the thought or sentence? Plus, I feel like I can eyeball some of that. Different guys gave me different levels of honesty. Even within one interview I can sense when it shifted to or away from party line. Sometimes in the rambling. Rick was a big one for that. Both Rick and Jaeses actually. They were stream of consciousness talkers. So I am more moved by what they said when I read it because it was almost like they were talking to themselves, trying to construct a fragmented story in their own mind through their conversation with me. I became more negligible.

Having spent one of my years between college and graduate school working in outside sales (which helped motivate me to get back to graduate school), I am reminded by this reflection of something they taught us in our sales training—people love to talk about themselves. I think that as researchers we can sometimes make ourselves too important in the scheme of things. Not that it is not necessary and appropriate to consider what impact our presence and characteristics may have, just that sometimes it may not be "all about" us.

CONCLUSION

There were numerous times throughout the research process when I very vividly felt the dividing line of race and gender and how it impacted my thoughts about the research and my interactions with the research participants. Looking back on these reflections and this process, I realize that some of the precariousness that I felt regarding my status as a researcher, the nature of the "evidence" I was collecting, and a sense of debt to the participants seems to be both appropriate and common for most researchers, beginning and otherwise. It is perhaps more problematic with the crossing of race and gender boundaries. The more specific concerns about how my race and gender and racist socialization may have intervened to impact my approach to the work and my reception among the members, including the question of sexual and romantic interest, are less easy to resolve. In some sense, maybe in part based on the relationship I have with my major professor, it is through identifying, naming, and exploring them that some resolution can be reached (if resolution, at least in part, requires recognition). However, it was also clear from the research process itself that many times during the interviews my common Greek experience and knowledge about the functioning of the black Greek system (known in part to the participants because of my participation in a panel on this very topic) were more salient and changed the nature of the interaction. This realization requires me to remember the ultimately social nature of all research, that these identities and boundaries are a part of the ongoing interaction between researcher and participant

(Kusow 2003) and should not lead to an application of standpoint theory that contributes to an essentializing of these positions (Kirsch 1999).

I still struggle with the issue of whether I am the right person for the research that I am most interested in doing. I do not think that cross-race research is either inherently good or inherently bad. Its quality and value should be determined by the outcomes, not by the preexisting conditions. I believe, although it is certainly up for debate, that the salience of a common Greek experience within the college campus context mediated the boundaries of race and gender I was crossing in doing this research. Truth and evidence are determined in large part by perspective. However, with Mannheim (1936), I also believe that each of us has a perspective on reality that makes available a different piece of the puzzle and that together these pieces may get us closer to understanding our world than any one perspective alone would. Mannheim argues that this synthesis is the job of social scientists. I think it may be the job of social science writ large where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The question of when, where, and how my whiteness impacts my research and, more recently, my teaching of race and ethnicity will be omnipresent. I mentioned earlier that I have received comments from several colleagues and friends of color whose opinions mean a *lot* to me that talking to me is not like talking to a white person. I'm embarrassed to admit that I remember almost every single instance almost verbatim. It was just a few years ago that I figured out I did not need the permission or approval of every person of color I met to do what I do. So why is it still always such a big deal? And is it even possible for my whiteness to cease to matter in some interactions? This issue was painfully brought to my consciousness again recently.

Not too long ago, a former student (an African American male) stopped by to see me. He and I have an ongoing conversation on just about everything, including race, as we see each other periodically on campus. He stopped by because he had been thinking about the use of humor in talking about race, something we had discussed on multiple occasions. We had discussed it in my class the semester before, and it had come up several times recently, mainly through a very popular Comedy Central sketch comedy show that I had already told him I couldn't watch because it wasn't funny to me. He had just seen a movie that was a satirical take on race and was feeling very heavy. It wasn't funny to him either, he said. It was serious, and it was real, and he felt like as a black man he was supposed to make it funny to make other people feel comfortable, and he did not want to play that role anymore. I stood there, seeing his pain, knowing I felt it too. I think that's why he came to see me. And I felt so unbelievably inadequate. I know I felt the pain whether anyone else believes it. I also know it was not personal for me in the way it was for him. And never could be. It was *his* skin, *not* mine, and no matter what I felt it could not ever be that personal for me. Even if I were in an interracial relationship. So I could "do" or not "do" whiteness, and I can recognize that and have had it recognized by others. But I cannot change my skin color, so just how fluid is this social construction of race?

As for the impact of the interracial marriage movement on race relations in America, I continue to observe with cautious skepticism, having too much firsthand knowledge of the pervasiveness of racism in old and young generations of white Americans. This particular knowledge is something that does seem available to me, as a white woman doing race research, in a way that it is not for many conservative black scholars who write about the end of racism (see, for instance, McWhorter 2000).

I should say that as I continue to explore race on campus, I have become increasingly interested in doing research on what types of programs, classes, interactions, and so forth impact whether or not white students on campus experience a decline in prejudice and/or an increase in their commitment to fighting racism. I suppose I may one day not have to worry about doing cross-race research, as white people are the real subjects to study as far as this problem is concerned. If this is the case, I will still encourage future students to explore whatever issue they feel compelled to, no matter the difficulties. What I have learned, just about myself, is worth it.

NOTES

1. Black Greek organizations have a long history in the black community and in U.S. higher education. The first black Greek organization was founded in 1906 at Cornell University. There are now nine national black Greek organizations under the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), the national governing body of black Greek organizations (Ross 2000). Current membership in the NPHC is over 1.5 million. According to the history of the NPHC, racism had prevented blacks from joining already existing white fraternal organizations. Black students on both historically black campuses and predominantly white campuses founded fraternal organizations to enhance their college experiences and to deal with political and social issues facing the black community (Rodriguez 1995). Jones in fact identifies the "macro-political roots of BGFs [black Greek fraternities] as socio-political movements" (Jones 1999, 26). This is different from the specifically social focus of predominantly white fraternities and sororities (Whipple, Baier and Grady 1991; Wilder and McKeegan 1999).
2. "'Jungle Fever' is Spike Lee's [not original to him but used effectively in this film] term for unhealthy sexual attraction between the races—for relationships based on stereotypes. Too often, he believes, when blacks and whites go to bed with one another, they are motivated, not by love or affection, but by media-based myths about the sexual allure of the other race" (Ebert 1991).

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