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LELIA LOMBA De ANDRADE

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NEGOTIATING FROM THE INSIDE

Constructing Racial and Ethnic
Identity in Qualitative Research

LELIA LOMBA DE ANDRADE
Bowdoin College

LELIA LOMBA DE ANDRADE is an assistant professor of sociology and Africana studies at Bowdoin College. Her current research focuses on the connections Cape Verdean Americans maintain with the homeland and the uses of this connection in their formation of community and identity.

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This article provides a critical analysis of the role of the “insider” researcher in qualitative fieldwork in race and ethnicity. The analysis is based on research conducted on the construction of racial and ethnic identity in the Cape Verdean American community of southeastern New England. Reflections are presented on the various ways that the researcher’s status as an “insider” was evaluated and negotiated during fieldwork. It is suggested that these negotiations reveal the manner in which group members define the boundaries of the group, the attributes they associate with it, and the meaning of the group itself. This interpretation of insider status, as involving complex and ongoing definitions and negotiations of group membership, highlights the way that researchers and participants are simultaneously engaged in the construction of race and ethnicity.

There is a serious disjuncture between qualitative research methodology and the dominant conceptual perspective of race and ethnicity in sociology. Most contemporary substantive work in race and ethnicity is grounded in a perspective of these phenomena as social constructs. That is, race and ethnicity are products of social interaction and institutional relations. Although researchers often assume this perspective, they have not thoroughly incorporated it into their methodological analyses. Instead, qualitative methodology in racial and ethnic research has focused on how the racial and ethnic identity of the researcher and participant impact the research process. The effect is to present race and ethnicity as external phenomena that are imposed on the research process rather than as dynamic phenomena that are actually constructed and reinforced through it.

In large part, this concept-method disjuncture can be traced to significant methodological developments in other related disciplines in the academy. In the 1970s and 1980s, prompted mostly by black, Chicano/a and feminist studies, social researchers directed more critical attention to the role of researchers relative to their community of informants (Andersen 1993; DeVault 1996; Zavella 1989). In sociology, and in racial and ethnic studies in particular, this type of analysis emerged as the “insider/outsider” debate.

The insider/outsider debate addressed the qualitative difference between the work conducted by insiders, those who share membership

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with the social group studied, and outsiders. It was particularly concerned with research conducted on minority communities and focused on issues of power and authority in the field. Working within this framework, the debate addressed the relationship between the researcher and participants in terms of access and rapport in three primary ways. First, it questioned how the race and ethnicity of the researcher vis-à-vis the participants influenced interaction and participation (Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1988; Merton 1972; Baca Zinn 1979). Second, it examined the impact of this dynamic on the quality of the research conducted, in terms of how the research topic was conceptualized or framed and the interpretation of findings (Blauner and Wellman 1973; Ladner 1973). Finally, it questioned the role of race relations in the discipline itself, calling attention to the predominance of white researchers in the production of scholarship about minority experiences with race and ethnicity (Wilson 1974; Blauner and Wellman 1973; Beoku-Betts 1994). Because this debate limited analysis to a single dimension of researcher and participant identity, it stalled on the issue of whether these identity relations made research invalid, better, or just different.

Recently, methodological analyses of the relationship between researchers and participants have taken a more critical form. Attention has shifted to examining how the multiple roles and perspectives of the researcher shape the research process. Again, feminist methodologists have generated much of this sociological conversation as their scholarship has become more attentive to the multiple realities of women with various class, racial, ethnic, and sexual statuses (DeVault 1996). From these critiques emerged evaluations of the manner in which the intersecting social statuses of the researcher and the research participant influence what is said, what is heard, and how it is interpreted (DeVault 1995; Andersen 1993; Krieger 1985; Oakley 1981; Stacey 1988; Naples 1996).

Some feminist scholars have carried this work into their analyses of research methods in racial and ethnic studies. For example, Maxine Baca Zinn (1979) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986) drew on this perspective to inform their critiques of the insider/outsider debate. They challenged the notion of the insider as a single dimensional status, while emphasizing the significance of race and ethnicity in qualitative research. Since then, other feminist scholars of race and ethnicity, such as Andersen (1993) and Beoku-Betts (1994), have drawn on these methodological developments to problematize the role of racial and

ethnic identity in research. They too have called attention to the multiple dimensions of identity and its dynamic role in the research process. Unfortunately, apart from these developments, qualitative research methodology in racial and ethnic studies has remained somewhat static and underdeveloped (Stanfield 1993). It continues to give passing recognition to the impact of race and ethnicity in research but has failed to offer a more complex analysis of this phenomenon. Meanwhile, in work focusing specifically on feminist methodology, scholars have continued to take on the issue of how race and ethnicity influence the research process. This work has been particularly useful in recognizing that race and ethnicity are a constant and dynamic presence in fieldwork in ways that may or may not be explicit (DeVault 1995).

In this article, I extend this line of analysis to research methodology in racial and ethnic studies. More specifically, I use it to examine the status of the insider, which is predicated on the racial and ethnic identity of the researcher in relation to research participants. I argue that because race and ethnicity are ever-present factors in field research, insider/outsider status is also an ongoing presence or dynamic in the research process (Naples 1996). Using data from my work as a Cape Verdean American researcher in the Cape Verdean American community, I reflect on how my insider status was negotiated in the course of doing research. I suggest that as participants evaluated my status in relation to the group, they also gave this group membership meaning and used it to define the boundaries of the group. By calling attention to the multiple negotiated dimensions of insider status in racial and ethnic research, I highlight how race and ethnicity, as mediated through insider status, is constructed and becomes a central dynamic in the research process. In this way, I bring the dominant conceptual perspective of race and ethnicity as social constructs into alignment with the methodical trend of examining the role of the insider.

CONTEXT: STUDYING CAPE VERDEAN IDENTITY

I draw my analysis from my experiences doing research on the construction of racial and ethnic identity among Cape Verdean Americans in southeastern New England. In this research, I use an approach informed by symbolic interactionist and social constructionist

theoretical perspectives. That is, I view racial and ethnic identity as having complex meanings that are produced in social interaction. They are represented by collections of symbols or signifiers that include such things as physical attributes, as well as behaviors, family relations, group rituals, and even clothing. Social actors read and manipulate these signifiers in the course of interaction as they attempt to categorize themselves and others in a kind of social negotiation (Barth 1969). Because race and ethnicity are sensitive to context or situations, social actors may change their selection and presentation of racial and ethnic signifiers as they move into various social contexts (Okamura 1981; Gans 1999). However, social actors do not arbitrarily or freely select the signifiers of race and ethnicity or create them themselves. Rather, the collection of signifiers associated with racial and ethnic categories is itself the product of social forces and is informed by socio-historic and institutional processes. Following this, race and ethnicity are produced through institutional and interactional processes (Omi and Winant 1994). Social actors "do" racial and ethnic presentations by drawing on and assembling signifiers that are available to them and which they interpret as meaningful to the social context (West and Fenstermaker 1995). In doing so, they reinforce, reshape, or construct the meaning of race and ethnicity.

Cape Verdean Americans engage in this process of racial and ethnic identity construction in a very self-conscious or self-aware manner. They perceive their fit into common notions of racial and ethnic categories as problematic. This is in part rooted in their perspective of the origins of Cape Verdean people. The Cape Verdean homeland, Cabo Verde, is an archipelago located about four hundred miles off the northwest coast of Africa. The Portuguese settled the islands with exiles and entrepreneurs from their own country along with members of various other European and West African ethnic groups (Meintel 1984). The Cape Verdean population emerged out of this multiethnic, multinational setting, and today the majority of the population claims mixed European and African ancestry (Coli 1987; Lobban and Lopes 1995). This diverse history is the source of many of the signifiers Cape Verdean Americans use to construct their identity. As on the islands and in other parts of their diaspora, Cape Verdeans in America employ multiple and shifting methods of labeling themselves in racial and ethnic terms. They select and interpret some combination of elements of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic history to label themselves, such as Portuguese, black,

black-Portuguese, white, mulatto, Moreno, mixed, and multiracial, or avoid racial labeling by using terms such as “aracial,” or simply Cape Verdean. This richness in modes of self-identification lends a level of complexity to Cape Verdean constructions of identity. The range of physical attributes Cape Verdeans may present compounds this complexity. Common physical signifiers of race and ethnicity, such as skin tone, hair texture, and facial features vary quite dramatically in the Cape Verdean population. Individuals may exhibit complex combinations of signifiers commonly associated with different racial or ethnic groups. Cape Verdean Americans perceive that the combination of their mode of self-identification and appearance challenges American conventions of racial and ethnic identification.

With this research project, I sought to investigate the manner in which Cape Verdean Americans define and employ these complex notions of racial and ethnic identity. I was interested in how Cape Verdean Americans manage these presentations and negotiate identities that are meaningful to themselves and others in interaction. In 1991, following a preliminary period of investigation, I moved into a Cape Verdean enclave just outside of Providence, Rhode Island, and began a phase of intensive participant observation. During this period, I attended a range of community cultural events including dances and political functions, such as visits from Cape Verdean dignitaries, and independence celebrations. I also visited various Cape Verdean cultural clubs and organizations, as well as libraries and churches in the core community. In addition, I attended a number of smaller functions and gatherings in private homes and public halls and spent lots of time just visiting with community members I encountered. In all of these situations I observed and engaged in conversations about the community and Cape Verdean identity. I described my research, noted comments and advice, and eventually began soliciting participants for more formal semistructured interviews.

I continued this participant observation while I conducted forty-eight interviews in various Cape Verdean enclaves located in or near the cities of Providence, Rhode Island, and New Bedford, Massachusetts. I interviewed twenty-five women and twenty-three men between the ages of twenty-one and eighty-six.¹ These participants were second and third generation Cape Verdean Americans as well as immigrants who had spent most of their lives in America. The interviews were semistructured, using open-ended questions that I had developed during the

preceding phases of my research. They ranged in length from approximately forty-five minutes to as long as six hours.

***CRIOULA*² AND SOCIOLOGIST**

I entered the field with some trepidation about how my research topic would be received in these interviews. This feeling grew out of my personal, as well as professional knowledge of the issues. I had grown up in the Rhode Island and Massachusetts Cape Verdean enclaves, and both sides of my family had come from Cabo Verde. From these experiences, I had an impression of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity as being a popular, but highly controversial and emotional subject. My preliminary interviews and participant observation reinforced this impression. I found that racial and ethnic identity was a common topic of discussion at Cape Verdean gatherings. The Cape Verdeans that I encountered in my fieldwork often approached the topic with very strong opinions and with little flexibility. They reported that this issue was the source of friction in families, ended friendships, and was even the cause of failed marriages.

Of course, with such a sensitive and highly charged topic, I worried about how people in the community would respond to my questions. I thought, however, from my training in qualitative research methods, that my insider status would facilitate this process. I knew that I had insider knowledge about some of the forms that identity issues took in the community. For example, I knew I should never assume that family members shared the same racial and ethnic identity and that each of the islands of Cabo Verde is commonly associated with a distinctive heritage that could be used as shorthand for race (and ethnicity). I expected this knowledge would help me recognize some of the pitfalls or landmarks of this research that an outsider researcher might not see. I also thought that it would be fairly obvious to respondents that I was presenting myself as Cape Verdean; my family names alone would lead many people in the community to recognize me as a member of the group. I assumed that this would make establishing my insider status a bit easier and, by extension, facilitate rapport and comfort around such a sensitive topic.

What I found, however, was that these very things that I imagined would help my research confounded the process in multiple ways. I

quickly discovered that my insider status complicated the interview situation in ways that I had not read about or imagined. I learned that my Cape Verdean identity was negotiated and constructed as part of the interview process and that it challenged, changed, and distorted the interview subject in ways that were sometimes visible, sometimes not.

One of the first ways that I became aware of how my insider status would be defined and negotiated in the research process was in the initial response of the participants to the interview. Typically I began the interviews by briefly describing my vision of the research project. I told participants that I was most interested in their experiences as Cape Verdeans and gave details about confidentiality and interview format. Because my topic was sensitive, I tried to approach it carefully, after some familiarity and comfort had been established in the interview setting (Oakley 1981). I proceeded with general background questions about the participants' lives: where they grew up, the composition of their household, etc.

The participants in the research responded in ways that challenged me to reevaluate my interpretation of the significance of my role as a Cape Verdean researcher. In some cases, their responses generally conformed to patterns highlighted in insider literature. Their assessment of my group membership or insider status appeared to include an assumption that I shared their knowledge and experience. This eased our transition into the more sensitive, intimate topic of racial and ethnic identity. What I wasn't prepared for was just how quickly we would move into these topics and the ways in which my identity would become part of the text. The following excerpt from my interview with Carlos provides a good example of this pattern of response. Early in the interview, I asked Carlos about the structure of his household and community when he was growing up.

L: And so extended family here as well? Did you have. . . ?

C: Extended family like? For instance?

L: Aunts, uncles, cousins and that kind of thing. . . .

C: Okay. Yeah. . . .

L: That were close in Fox Point?

C: Yeah, when you say "extended family," you're not talking about people who lived with you? You're just talking about. . . .

L: Well, they're included of course, because they become your family, don't they? They really are. . . .

C: Yeah, but what happens is that most of our parents that came from the old country, they all knew each other even though they came from the different islands. So actually there was no separation. We were all family. And here we are; I'm going to be 66 years old and that hasn't changed. I think that what happens is that something happens, it's a bonding that happens in families. That was our experience and even when we don't see each other for years, you know, when we see each other it's like Christmas all over again. That feeling is always there. If that's what you mean by extended family, we certainly have extended family. For instance, when we have people die in different families, the churches are full, because you know, because what's happened to us, that bonding of love that we've all grown up with. I think that with Cape Verdeans there's a tight bond. Even as I look at you, knowing that you're from a Cape Verdean family, I don't see you as a stranger, but as part of my family. And that's not only words, that's true. It just is. It's not just something that we just say we're going to do. . . it just is! Do you know what I mean? So when you walk around and you see another Cape Verdean you say, "Hey, what's happening!" You know, it's nice. That's how it is. That's how it's always been. My hopes are that our kids, like you, my children, my grandchildren, it will rub off, so that we can keep this thing going. Because it's beautiful.

L: Yeah that's great. That's what my research is. . . I'm hoping to do. . .

C: And not only that, but you see, Cape Verdeans, another thing about Cape Verdeans, we come from black, brown, white, it's a mixed race. Right from the islands, and so we, our parents come over here and they don't have any idea about not being better than anybody else or worse, or lower than anybody else. . . they're people! From day one, sweetheart, you know what I mean? We have an identity. And we know who we are. . . you see? So I think that it made it much easier for Cape Verdeans to assimilate and to be part of what's happening here in this country.

Two features of this excerpt are particularly notable in regard to the influence of insider status on the interview. First, it is obvious from this quote that Carlos recognized me as an insider and incorporated me into his reflections about Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity. In this and in many other interviews, I was taken aback by the centrality of my identity in the discussions and how the reading of it could influence the direction of the interview. Despite the fact that he had met me only a few minutes prior, Carlos spoke freely and openly about his life and thoughts about being Cape Verdean. He made his recognition of my group membership central to the text and explicit with references to me

in his examples and the pronouns he used. The openness and directness of his response seems to be related to his recognition of me as part of this Cape Verdean "family." It was grounded in an assumption that as such we shared experience and perspective.

The second notable element of this excerpt is related to this, although in a subtler dynamic. Clearly, Carlos did more here than simply describe the cultural practices of the community. He also explained his interpretation of the group. In addition to the cultural characteristics of the group, he described Cape Verdeans in racial terms, as a mix of black, brown, and white. With this definition of the group, Carlos constructed his racial and ethnic identity as such. Because he recognized me as a Cape Verdean, he simultaneously defined or constructed my identity. My responses and incorporation in these discussions meant that I was also engaging with him in the construction of the group and our racial and ethnic identities.

In other situations, the participants also incorporated my self-presentation into their construction of the group, but in a somewhat different manner. These participants were not quite as open to engaging in the process of construction so readily. They approached the topic with reserve and seemed to engage in discussion only with those group members who shared their approach to Cape Verdean identity. As a result, they used their interpretation of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity as a kind of gatekeeping mechanism. In these interviews, crafting a Cape Verdean presentation became a much more dynamic and complex attribute. Simply identifying myself as Cape Verdean was not sufficient to gain in-group membership and, by extension, access to these private discussions (Baca Zinn 1979; Kondo 1990). It was in these interviews that managing my racial and ethnic presentation became both a serious concern and subject of analysis. My "Cape Verdean-ness" was relatively obvious to participants and it made the appearance of neutrality impossible. Clearly, as a Cape Verdean I had engaged in a similar process. The question, for these participants and for me, was how my understanding of being Cape Verdean related to theirs.

Because of this question, the process of negotiating my identity became a consistent and important theme in the research process. The participants took cues about my interpretation of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity from my self-presentation and they reacted to these cues. As a result, I was concerned with how my presentation would

influence the interactions in these interviews. For example, their reaction to or interpretation of my physical appearance was a constant concern. Long before I had initiated this research, I had made choices about my physical presentation that challenged some traditional aesthetics of Cape Verdean Americans. I wore my curly, somewhat frizzy, hair in a “natural” style. In addition, I often got quite tanned in the summer and my normally light, coffee-colored complexion darkened to a medium brown color. I knew that participants would interpret this arrangement of physical attributes as a marker of my own understanding of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity. Consequently, it could have significant impact on my relationship with them. Participants might read my “dark” skin and “untamed,” *cabesa sec* (dry, wild hair) as a more black or African interpretation of Cape Verdean identity. For those who embraced a more European conception of Cape Verdean identity, this might produce some reluctance or barriers in the interview. On the other hand, by wearing my hair straighter and avoiding a tan, I could appear to these participants as one of the same. In that case, I might have more success establishing rapport.

There were also Cape Verdeans who had rejected those aesthetic values and who therefore might respond to my presentation of self more favorably. A significant problem here was that I could not predict what modes of racial and ethnic identity the research participants might employ before their interview and therefore couldn’t adjust my presentation accordingly. Thus I was never quite sure how my appearance would influence the research process, only that it did.

A: In my own family, people in different times have got upset with me, my....uh wearing my hair, for the past 20 some years in a fro. . . .

J: Mmm, it doesn’t work. . . .

A: Nooo! No, no, no, no! [laughter]. The first time you come home like that [laughter]. . . and you meet somebody and you know they’re looking at your hair and wondering, “How could she possibly have her hair like this?” and they’re talking to you and. . . they want to look, and they don’t want to look. . . . They’re looking all over the place and you know! And you’re just grinning on the inside and you make the conversation even longer. . . cause you can sense that they’re uncomfortable with the way you look and they know you, and they know your family and they don’t expect you to be doing this. They think they know you; they don’t really know how you feel.

Antoinette might have told this story about her experiences with the politics of hair in the Cape Verdean community to another interviewer who managed a more “controlled” or straightened hairstyle. This particular telling, however, suggests that she recognized that we shared a common approach to managing physical appearance. This point in the interview was a kind of bonding moment that marked my insider status and eased our interaction. Our similar style in presentation served as an indication of our possibly sharing perspectives on Cape Verdean identity and its politics in the community.

My appearance was not simply used as a passive subtext that influenced my interaction with participants. It became a dynamic part of the text, used as a reference in respondents’ stories and descriptions of Cape Verdean life. An example of this process is apparent in my interview with Joe. He described his wife’s experiences growing up Cape Verdean and the problematic interaction in his city between the larger African American community and the Cape Verdean community.

L: Did she think of herself as Cape Verdean? Did she call herself Cape Verdean?

J: Yes. Her name was Smedo. . . .

L: Oh yes. . . that’s a big Cape Verdean family.

J: Yes. And she had the same problem...I don’t know if you know. . . maybe you might have had the same problems. . . when you get around the blacks. . . the American blacks. . . they look at you and treat you differently. . . .

L: Mmmm. . . .

J: Well, she had that problem. She had that problem in New York, because she had. . . she was like your complexion with long hair. . . and she had trouble with black girls. . . .

As these examples suggest, the participants used my appearance as a reference point in their stories. Drawing on their interpretations of my appearance, they solicited my opinions and made assumptions about the experiences and perspectives I might have. In doing so, they made me an active participant in their descriptions of identity construction, and they suggested that they viewed me as an insider.

Obviously, the participants’ reading of my presentation and their interpretation of my identity were not simply limited to looking at the way that I wore my hair or my skin color. They read a variety of attri-

butes, such as body type, facial features, manner of speech, and dress as signifiers of my racial and ethnic identity. In addition, they also described using a traditional Cape Verdean cultural perspective to read and interpret these attributes. That is, they associated combinations of attributes with specific islands of Cabo Verde and the particular racial and ethnic character associated with each of them.³ For example, they may have interpreted my manner of speaking as suggesting that I have a black identity, or they may have associated the combination of my facial features and coloring with the island of Brava and interpreted my identity as relatively Portuguese or white. However, this process of reading and interpreting attributes was far more complicated and subtle than these examples imply. Complex combinations and intersections of multiple attributes gave clues to my interpretation of Cape Verdean identity. The participants read these attributes simultaneously and used them to interpret my racial and ethnic presentation.

The ways that participants engaged in this process of interpreting attributes revealed another dimension of the construction of racial and ethnic identity. With their responses, they suggested which attributes were important to them as signifiers of group membership and in doing so highlighted the manner in which they defined the group and its parameters (Barth 1969). For example, in the preceding excerpt from the interview with Joe, he referred to his wife's family name, skin color, and hair in response to my question about her identity. These attributes were important signifiers of Cape Verdean identity to Joe and his use of them describes the boundaries of the group, by suggesting that possession of such attributes implies group membership.

EMERGENT EXPERTISE

In addition to my physical appearance, the participants also interpreted my group membership in terms of who and what I knew in the Cape Verdean community. In almost every interview, we engaged in a process of listing the names of community members or important moments in Cape Verdean cultural history. Often these exchanges extended beyond listing to include related questions about my family. They occurred in various points in the interviews, and it frequently seemed as though they would continue until we finally established that there was some Cape Verdean person or event in common in our lives.

These exchanges were seldom a central element of any story the participants told. Rather, they represented an attempt to determine my connection to the community. Because I am a Cape Verdean who grew up in the community, the participants sought to identify my links to the Cape Verdean social world in which they were active.

For example, in my interview with Tony, he repeatedly changed the focus of our discussion to locate me in the community. He started by asking me if I knew his children. This conversation was not very satisfactory, because although their names seemed familiar, I didn't know any of them personally. A few minutes later in the interview, the locating reappeared. This was a shift not only in topic but also in interview roles for us. He responded to my questions about the participation of his family members in the Cape Verdean organizations with questions about the participation of my family members, particularly my parents and me, in the Cape Verdean community.

T: Who are your parents?

L: David and Bernice De Andrade. My father lived in the Point for a little while. And they lived on Arnold Street when they first got married but only for a couple of years.

T: I may know him by sight. . . . but most of them, like I said, are younger than I am.

L: He's a big guy. He's pretty big. I think he's fifty-nine.

T: Did he go to the club a lot?

L: No my parents. . . they never. My mom is from New Bedford so they would go to New Bedford. . . .

T: Oh, she's from New Bedford. . . .

L: When they do anything, they go to New Bedford. . . .

T: New Bedford seems to have more action out there. The only real club that we have out here is the one in East Providence, the CV club. They've got a few clubs in Pawtucket. . . .

As this example illustrates, early in the research process I responded to these questions with vague descriptions of my parents and their history in the community. As the research project developed, however, I sought more information about my family history and social connections in the community and grew more adept at facilitating this locating process. Eventually, I was able to locate myself with more culturally significant and meaningful community referents. I began to refer to myself using the language of Cape Verdean identity, stating that I am

dja Brava and *dja Fogo*, rather than simply stating that my family was from the islands of Brava and Fogo. I noted my family's connection to some of the primary ethnic enclaves in the area, like Fox Point, New Bedford, and Scituate. I also mentioned my relationship to a popular figure in the Cape Verdean community in Rhode Island, Manny-Saint, a local barber. My attempts to facilitate this locating process were certainly not always successful, but they did improve over time. As a result, the research also included a process of socialization in which I learned to act and eventually became more Cape Verdean in my presentation of self. In this sense, the research project became a collaboration in which the participants evaluated my presentation while teaching me how best to construct it.

Another aspect of this process of locating me within the Cape Verdean community seemed to involve an evaluation of my Cape Verdean identity. Many participants questioned me about my knowledge of the Cape Verdean community, history, and culture. This seemed to me to be another gatekeeping procedure. The participants evaluated my validity as a Crioula researcher and used this evaluation to gage the degree of access to information about Cape Verdeans that they would grant me. Some research participants looked for knowledge-based markers of Cape Verdean identity. They asked me questions about the political history of the islands or about other social science research on Cape Verdeans. In some of these cases, my familiarity with the work of various Cape Verdean scholars seemed to give me validity but in other cases it was not sufficient. For example, when I called one very active, senior member of the community to request an interview, she asked me a number of questions about the struggle for independence in Cabo Verde. Following this conversation, she required that I read a political pamphlet presenting the pro-Portuguese side of the conflict before she would participate in an interview. It was only after I had picked up the monograph and read it that I could call to schedule the interview. It was more common, however, for participants to ask me if I knew how to speak *Crioulo* or if I had been to the "old country," Cabo Verde. I explained that my knowledge of Crioulo is very limited and that although I had planned to go to the islands, I had not had the opportunity to go yet. Participants usually responded to these admissions with friendly but stern lectures about the future of the community and my parents' feelings.

This pattern of response also reflects the way that age differences influenced my interactions with participants. At the time of these inter-

views, I was in my mid-twenties and most of the participants were much older. The participants perceived me as a member of the next, upcoming generation, and they viewed the interview as an opportunity to express their hopes and expectations about how my generation would engage in Cape Verdean cultural life. For example, in the excerpt from his interview that I presented earlier, Carlos expressed his hope that my generation would carry on Cape Verdean traditions. In addition, their age relative to mine added another level of meaning to their questioning of me. Because of the age differences, participants' questions were not only used to interpret my presentation in regard to the interview and my access to information but also used to evaluate the credibility of my presentation as a Cape Verdean in general.

The importance of participants' evaluation of my Crioulo-ness or community membership was highlighted throughout the research. In many of the interviews I conducted, other Cape Verdeans were discounted because of the limitations in their connections to the Cape Verdean community. These Cape Verdeans were designated as not "really real" Crioulos, or as one respondent described, they were simply "Cachupa Cape Verdeans."⁴ The participants viewed these other Cape Verdeans negatively because rather than being truly engaged members of the community, they only presented simple signifiers of group membership. They were Cape Verdeans only in a symbolic sense (Gans 1999). This pattern in the interviews drew attention to the dynamic, impermanent aspect of insider status. Through them, I understood that insider status is not simply granted or achieved. It is created through an ongoing process of evaluation that is dependent on the performance of group membership by researchers and participants at multiple levels.

The selection and accentuation of these forms of signifiers also relates to the construction of race and ethnicity. As participants in my research made it clear that there was more to being Cape Verdean than *looking* or assembling simple signifiers, they highlighted the depth and range of meanings associated with race and ethnicity. To them, race and ethnicity was not simply presented, but performed or accomplished (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Race and ethnicity are constituted not only of physical attributes but also of an assortment of complex behavior including ways of knowing, attitudes, and modes of communication.

Because I was a member of the community and was also engaged in the process of constructing my identity, this evaluation process had an additional level of risk. Had I not been able to conform to the

participants' expectations of the attributes required of group members, I would have been disqualified. That is, I would have been left in a precarious situation of having an invalid racial and ethnic identity (Omi and Winant 1994). The opportunities for my disqualification seemed to abound in this research project. At times, it seemed to require that I have personal mastery of the very topic that I was investigating, the complexity of Cape Verdean racial and ethnic identity construction.

INSIDER STATUS: TURNING THE TABLES ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

There was also another dimension of risk built into this project, one that I was not prepared for and only became aware of later in the research. As an insider, information about me, my family, and my place in the community became part of the research process. Because it was advocated as part of a feminist methodological strategy, I did not hesitate to disclose considerable amounts of personal information (Oakley 1981; Smith 1987). However, because I had a distinct, previous relationship to the community, this disclosure had implications in terms of my privacy and separateness as a person beyond my role as a researcher. I was very much aware that the evaluation of me as a Cape Verdean by my research participants would reflect on members of my family and me beyond the completion of the project itself.

Disclosure also reinforced the duality of my role in the community, as a kind of outsider-within (Collins 1986). My role as a researcher, and thus an outsider, enabled participants to ask me questions about my personal feelings, life, and identity that would not be appropriate in everyday situations in the Cape Verdean community. The outsider role thus required a level of disclosure reserved for more intimate relations. At the same time, my group membership made the information that I was asked to provide significant to the participants in different ways. This information was not about an "other" or an outsider. It was information about another insider, a community member. This dynamic made the research relationship equalizing in a different way than that advocated by feminist methodologists with outsider status (Smith 1987; Oakley 1981; Andersen 1993). My dual status gave the participants information that would not be available to them in other outsider research situations and, in this way, gave the participants additional power.

As a result, the participants were able to, and often did assume the role of investigator, and shifted me into that of the participant. These role relationships did not remain distinct in the interview process. We engaged in a process of exchange, constantly shifting role positions, and negotiating the norms of these roles. For example, in the following interview excerpt, Joe responded to the completion of the interview with questions of his own.

J: Yes. Okay. I feel like asking you some questions now.

L: You can ask me any questions you want.

J: So you felt like an American black or what?

L: Ummmm. . . I always just left it up for people to decide because I had friends who were from the Azores, and I would say, "Well, I'm Cape Verdean," and they'd say, "Why are you making such a big deal about being Cape Verdean, we don't tell people we're from the Azores. We're all Portuguese." And then. . . .

J: In other words, they wanted you to just say you're Portuguese.

L: Yes. Because they were saying they were Portuguese and they said we're all just Portuguese, you don't have to make a big deal. . . and then I had friends who were. . . who were black Americans and they said, "Why are you always making such a big deal about being Cape Verdean? You're just black, just like we are." And then in my family, it was always, "It's important to know you're Cape Verdean." My father is from Cape Verde, and, you know, they speak Crioulo at home and we always had Cape Verdean food. So I could never. . . I always guessed wrong. . . . you know if I said I'm Portuguese, then they'd say I'm Black. . . .

J: So, in other words, you were like in limbo there.

L: Yes! I always just let other people decide. I got to a point where I said, "You guess what I am. You tell me what you want me to be!"

J: In other words it was no big deal.

L: Yes.

J: It's the same way with me.

This is an example of the repositioning and disclosure we engaged in during the interviews. The story I told about my own struggles with race and ethnicity is quite personal and left me feeling vulnerable to evaluations or sanctions about the credibility or "realness" of my racial and ethnic identity. As such, it would not be the kind of information that I would typically share with a new acquaintance in the community. Nor would it be considered polite in the community for another group member to investigate these matters in this manner. During the interviews,

however, it seemed acceptable for Joe and other members of the community to prompt me to reveal these rough spots and fluctuations in my presentation. This short story left me professionally vulnerable as well, because I was not sure what kind of reaction it would receive from participants and how it would affect my research experiences. Fortunately, my shared experiences and interpretations did not have a negative impact on my fieldwork. Most of the participants seemed satisfied with the interview and the direction of my research. They responded to my disclosures with agreement or used them as cues to discuss other experiences that they had.

DISCUSSION

I had two primary objectives in presenting this analysis of my research experiences in the Cape Verdean American community. First, I wanted to call attention to the complexity of the ways that insider status operates in qualitative field research. I highlighted the ways that interpretation of my identity was incorporated into the research process and the responses that these interpretations elicited from participants. I found that there were multiple gates that need to be entered and multiple ways that my membership would be read. This demonstrates that my "insider" identity was not one-dimensional or certain, but needed to be negotiated.

The multiple forms and levels of insider status also highlight the complex ways that groups are defined and group membership extended. I perceive these processes as directly related to the construction of racial and ethnic identity. In my research, I found that as my status as an ethnic and racial insider was being evaluated, participants revealed the characteristics they associated with the group and the meanings attributed to the group and group membership. I expect that these processes are not limited to research involving the negotiation of insider status only. With so-called outsider researchers as well as insider researchers, participants will respond to perceptions of difference and/or similarity, and define the boundaries of the group accordingly (Naples 1996).

Viewed in this way, race and ethnicity appear to be working at another dimension in qualitative fieldwork. Participants are not simply sharing their perspectives of race and ethnicity, they are crafting interpretations in reaction to and through interaction with researchers. That

is, race and ethnicity are simultaneously the subject and product of field research. This perspective also helps to blur the line between insider and outsider researcher. The distinction between the two becomes much less significant when both are perceived as fluid, relative positions that are moved into and out of and are equally involved in the process of constructing race and ethnicity.

This brings me to the second point of my analysis. Both of these elements of my analysis bear on a larger critique of the implied conceptualization of race (and to some extent ethnicity) in qualitative research in racial and ethnic studies. Much of the research that addresses researcher and participant identity and how they influence the research process does so with fairly uncritical and problematic perspectives of race. These analyses, at worst, give a cursory inventory of researcher and participant racial identities. At best, they highlight the ways that race affects the process by showing how it appeared in the field. Unfortunately, in these approaches race takes on a static and one-dimensional tone. The effect of this approach has been to present the research process as something akin to home decorating. The racial identity of researchers and participants are like color swatches, selected from within a very limited color pallet, that are matched or contrasted. Framed in this way, it leaves social researchers to analyze the role of race in fieldwork in terms of how white researchers go with black participants and the results of matching a brown researcher with brown participants.

Although this narrow and latently essentialist perspective of race persists in methodological discussions, the conceptualization of race in substantive work in the field has become increasingly attentive of its dynamism and complexity. Much contemporary research on race and ethnicity has focused on the increasing diversity of "colors" in the U.S. population and the many forms and layers of black, Hispanic, and Asian racial identities for contemporary social actors here (Charles 1992; Espiritu 1992; Padilla 1984; Waters 1994). At the same time, even notions of "whiteness" have gotten more complicated as more attention has been directed to the racial and ethnic identities of unhyphenated, white social actors (Frankenburg 1993; Doane 1997; Waters 1990; Lieberman 1991; Gans 1999). Methodological analysis in qualitative research on race and ethnicity needs to incorporate this conceptualization of race and ethnicity. This is a difficult task, as it calls for researchers to become sensitive to a language of race and ethnicity that is often subtle and complex. However, by paying close attention to how we

learn to manage racial and ethnic identities in the field, our understanding of how these identities are constructed will in turn develop.

NOTES

1. The interview data presented in this paper have been altered to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Whenever possible, I changed the names of community members and locations within the community to referents with similar forms. For example, the first names and family names that appear throughout this text are common Cape Verdean names but are not the names given by the participants.

2. Crioula is the feminine of the term *Crioulo*. This term refers to the language of Cabo Verde as well as the group.

3. In Cape Verdean cultural tradition, there is a rich mythology or belief system that attributes a distinctive ethnic and racial character, including a typical look and cultural style, to each of the nine islands of Cabo Verde. For example, Brava is considered more Portuguese or white and a Brava "look" includes light, or ruddy, complexions and relatively straight hair. Sao Tiago is described as African and people are typified as having dark skin and more "African features." This is a very complex system, in which the physical attributes associated with an island don't always neatly or obviously correspond with its racial and ethnic character and other attributes like temperament and body type are included in the typologies. For example, the typical look of Sao Vicente is a combination of very dark skin and very straight hair, but the ethnic and racial character associated with the island is a combination of Portuguese and English, rendering it relatively white.

4. Cachupa is a popular Cape Verdean stew.

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