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**White man: black history.
Some problems and some possibilities.**

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(intro)

I want to take this opportunity to open a discussion which I almost never manage to have. It's a discussion which is usually strangled under the heading of 'methodology'. At least that's what I find in my main field of study, cultural sociology. I had to write a 'methodology' chapter for my PhD, which was a study of the construction and deconstruction of 'community' in the multi-ethnic inner area of Leeds known as Chapeltown. I searched in vain for anything which remotely resembled the intellectual, political and emotional problems I'd faced over the nearly 30 years I'd been working on this subject. I did the best I could, plundering the critiques of empiricism, the shambolic discussions of participant observation, sociological theorisation of identity, and so-called postmodern approaches to writing history. But very little of this touched on what I think are the first problem I'm going to discuss today. At the end of this talk I'm going to refer to this under the heading of black and white identities. That's going to be the bit of the talk when I try and persuade that I have some connection with the academy. But in this first two sections I'm going to talk about more everyday problems. For want of a better expression, I'm going to refer to this first problem now under the heading of 'boundaries' – the boundaries that exist between black people and white, and the often painful experience of attempting to cross those boundaries

when engaged in research (or in every other aspect of our lives, for that matter). The second part of the talk will discuss some of the political problems that arise when white people research black culture, and I will suggest some possible responses. But first, the problem of boundaries.

Crossing boundaries: this work may be painful

I've heard black people say how annoyed and frustrated they feel when they hear white people speaking as though they are experts on black culture or black history. I should make it clear that I'm using 'black' in its generic sense here, to refer to all non-white peoples. When I started doing my research, in 1972, I asked a Sikh man whom I knew through the Chapeltown Community Association about the Sikh community in Leeds. No, it wasn't Dr Kalsi, though I did meet him first around that time, and I've learnt a great deal from his work. This man told me that I ought to go and see Roger Ballard. I did so, and learnt much from him, and from Cathy Ballard, but I remember thinking that there was something strange going on here: an educated and articulate dark-skinned Sikh man telling me to go and see a white-skinned English man to find out about the Sikh man's culture. What was strange was that this Sikh gentleman didn't think it was strange at all. He wasn't bothered by the presence of a white 'expert', and I put that word in scare quotes, because it's the white academic's claim to 'expertise' which is so often questioned by black colleagues. *But I was*, because I had already been made starkly aware of how much resentment there was among some sections of the black population in Chapeltown about white researchers (and white students like me), and I could easily understand their sense of grievance. I was intellectually aware that living in a racist society like Britain meant that there were huge emotional, social and economic barriers between black people and white. As I got to know more, one or two black people made it very clear, in verbal and physical statements of enormous force, that what I saw as my efforts to cross those boundaries inspired their hatred of me. I think they believed I was making some profit, in terms of status and occupation, out of the lives of the people of Chapeltown. In their eyes, I think, I was in a position not far from that of a slave

owner. My book about Chapeltown will come out in a few months time, and I will hear on the grapevine about the small, but significant groups of black people who want to condemn me for making an even more authoritative claim to knowledge than that implied by my occasional appearance in the media. I'd be interested to know if Roger also experiences this resentment, and how he responds. For my part, I defend myself by reference to those black people who appreciate the work I do, and when that fails to boost my morale, I sink into despair. I say this not to seek your sympathy, but to point to a problem which I've never seen discussed: research work which crosses ethnic boundaries is emotionally fraught. Our emotional investments will have a direct bearing on our work, and they need to be exposed.

Now you may well be thinking that this is not a problem for historians. You may go further and acknowledge that it is a personal problem, but that academics, notoriously neurotic as they are, should push all that to one side and just get on with the issues directly relevant to their research. Historians are often insulated from the kinds of challenges I've just described. They deal with dead people and events camouflaged by the passage of time. The people they are writing about don't confront them in meetings and on the streets, or gossip about them behind their backs. But I think you'll find that lots of historians are emotionally invested in their subject area. The most obvious example are local and family historians – they are often uncovering information which is quite literally close to home, and they are often speaking with people whose lives may have been scarred by terrible events. Other historians, perhaps dealing with matters in the more distant past, will also uncover material which will cause emotional upset. Anyone researching into the history of slavery, or child abuse, or the exploitation and oppression of women, or the impoverishment of peasants and industrial workers is probably doing so because these are problems in which they have a deep personal, and political, interest.

The usual response in writings on method is to say that the researcher maintains a level of objectivity, detaches him/herself from these interests, gathers the material and makes the analysis quite dispassionately. This, I think, is a

major error, epistemologically and methodologically. That is not the way that good research will be done. When I found an account of the massacre of the Caribs of St Kitts Nevis, the island from which most of Chapeltown's African Caribbeans originate, I was shocked to the core. I shouldn't have been. I knew about these things. But suddenly the broad-brush accounts of colonial slaughter that I'd read in other books became very personal. Let me read you the account, published in 1878:

Short work was made of the Caribees on St Christopher's island. Having learnt, or imagined themselves to have learnt, that the natives had prepared a scheme for their destruction and were on the point of putting it into effect, the European settlers took stern and perhaps needless measures for their self preservation. Falling on the Caribees by night, they slew 127 of their stoutest men; having selected a few of their comeliest women for domestic service, they ordered the remainder of the aboriginal population to quit the island. This painful affair took place in 1625 or 1626 (Jeaffreson 1878, p. 39).

The leader of this 'perhaps needless' assault was Sir Thomas Warner. One of my good friends, a black woman whose family came to England in the 1960s from St Christopher, has his surname. It adds to my distress to feel this personal connection, however remote, to a mass murderer. It seems to me that there is an unexamined issue here for many researchers in the humanities and social studies: we feel these issues with the same, maybe more, intensity as we think about them. The production of appropriate research methods, we are informed by the people who write books with the M word in their titles, entails careful reflection on the type of material you are seeking to uncover, detailed evaluation of the validity of that material, and tests of the reliability of the analysis you make of that material. All well and good. I contend, however, that it should also entail proper reflection on the emotional investment the researcher has in the material and the analysis. Not in pursuit of some phony claims to objectivity – the suggestion that to know about your emotions is to somehow be able to control or suppress them, to expunge them from the analysis, is as morally deceitful as it psychologically implausible. We should reveal this to our readers simply to assist their reading of our texts. They should be

able to see where we are coming from, to put it colloquially. They should be given the resources to decide whether or not they trust our authorship. In the final section of this talk you'll see that I adopt the view that history (like sociology) is the construction of narratives which use various techniques in order to bolster their claims to plausibility. In my own case it is made very clear to me that some people (black and white) do place conditional trust in my work, while others (black and white) do not. By making my emotional investment plain I hope to provide one of the resources they need in order to decide on the validity of the research. I think the same holds true for historical research. Why should we trust the scholarship of people we don't know?

In sociology, issues raised by the researcher's investment in his or her work usually come under the heading of 'values', and the injunction that researchers should be 'value-neutral'. Values are normally thought of in the context of the political allegiances of the researcher, which are somehow separated from emotional investments, but I will argue that they should be linked, as the second section of this talk will now try and demonstrate.

The politics of research

The account I've just read of the massacre of the Caribs was produced from the papers left by one of Warner's colleagues, Christopher Jeaffreson. The author, named John Cordy Jeaffreson, inserted the words 'painful' and 'perhaps needless' into his text. These words may be taken as an indication that John Cordy held values which were sympathetic to the plight of the native people of the island. Interestingly, however, the gender issue – the implication of sexual servitude of the 'comeliest' female Caribs – is not problematised in this account. He did write, however, that Warner's party might have 'imagined' that the Caribs were planning an attack; presumably that idea was derived from some entry in Christopher Jeaffreson's papers. Perhaps Christopher Jeaffreson also had misgivings about the murders they committed. Here we find ourselves enmeshed in the difficult process of trying to figure out the morality of the settlers and the equally difficult task of deconstructing the politics of John Cordy's reconstruction. In my own work, which is

a reconstruction of the past thirty or so years of most of the social movements in Chapeltown, political commitments are foregrounded. Although my book does not declare much about my emotional investment – to be frank, I was over-determined by the academic convention of repression – I did make clear my own political commitments. I've said something about the emotional side of this because I've come to the conclusion that a large part of one's political dispositions are formed psychologically or emotionally. To repeat, this emotional/political field is usually written out of research in the humanities. Its absence is, however, always one of the most prominent features of the text, if I can briefly drop into the infuriating mode of paradox favoured by our friends in France. Yet we consistently write it in when we read the research. This is not just the case with the 'big names' in historical studies. Everyone knows that Eric Hobsbawm and EP Thompson are passionately committed to social justice, while AJP Taylor and David Starkey are passionately committed to appearing on television. (Speaking personally, I'm passionately committed to both.) This knowledge informs our reading of their research. But it is increasingly the case that we read the author's values and interests into the text even when he or she does not declare them openly. One of the great benefits of the sophisticated guidance we now all receive, either in contemporary educational classes, or in the serious media, on the construction and deconstruction of texts, is that we all know how to 'read between the lines'.

In the case I am trying to examine here, that of the white researcher investigating the lives, historical or contemporary, of black people, reading between the lines is only slightly more fraught with danger than open declarations of political affiliation. One strategy in writing up the research is to claim political neutrality – supposedly achieved by inserting yourself into the text as an 'objective researcher'. But, in my view, most readers are too sophisticated to accept such a claim. They make interpretations of absences or silences, they decode the evidence that the writer has selected, they note the class, the 'race' and the gender of the people who are foregrounded in the text, they look at the photo and biography of the author on the jacket, they read the acknowledgements to spot his/her friends and colleagues, and by these and other more subtle means they form a judgement of the writer's

political commitments. The reader makes these forensic investigations not simply because postmodernity is turning historical scholarship into a series of soap operas. They reflect his/her knowledge that the writer's emotional/political interests will shape the whole of the research process and the analysis of the materials gathered. So the writer might as well come clean.

If you adopt this position, and, as in my case, declare your emotional and political solidarity with the radical, anti-essentialist elements among the black and white populations, you risk challenge both from those you say you support, and even more so from those you don't. But that's as it should be. Solidarity is never automatic; it is always tested in practice and negotiated in debate. Best to declare your position. The declaration will be subjected to re-interpretation, but at least you have set out the terms on which you want to be interpreted. The purpose here is not – as my colleagues who are more comfortable with the academic conventions will probably say, with their penchant for *ad hominem* arguments – to further display the rampant ego of the author, but to provoke a more productive debate with the critical readers of the research.

Some possibilities: the academic context for this discussion

Finally, and briefly, because I'm running rapidly out of time, I want to mention some of the theoretical underpinnings of my argument. The first of these I have already alluded to. It is sometimes referred to among academics as the postmodern turn. It is the argument that there is no absolute truth to be revealed, however diligently we dig into the archives, however elaborately we analyse the statistics, however sensitively we conduct the qualitative investigations, however sophisticated are the theoretical tools we marshal in the analysis. I've with Hayden White (Jenkins 1991) when he says that writing history has more in common with writing a novel than it has to proving or disproving a hypothesis. I'm with Foucault (1980) when he says that 'truth' is contextual, a result of the application of power/knowledge. I don't accept the argument deployed against this view that it results in an apolitical relativism. (Interestingly, this argument does not refute the evidence provided; instead it supplies a counter-argument derived from another field.) Refusing to

claim absolute truth is quite compatible with adopting, and acting upon, a specific point of view, since (in my view) our political interests are not formed by supposedly objective analysis but are rooted in ethical and emotional commitments which predate our entry into the sphere of political rationality.

The second theoretical move relates to the question of identity, and it returns me to the starting point of this talk. I now realise that I felt uncomfortable when the Sikh man told me to go and see Roger to find out about Sikhs because I was working with a particular theory of identity. I thought that there was something utterly incompatible between Roger's identity as a white man and this man's identity as an Indian and as a Sikh. I thought that there was a difference between them which is nowadays referred to as an 'essential' or fundamental difference. This is the difference that is referred to when popular writers tell us that men are from Venus and women are from Mars. The discomfort – which in those days I thought was a political question, but which I now see was emotionally driven as well – was made worse by the realisation that, if it was the case, that Roger's identity precluded him from understanding the Sikhs, I too would never be able to carry out my own research plan, which at the time was a study of the Chapeltown Community Association. The Association was composed of people from various Caribbean islands, Indian and East African Sikhs, Africans and white people. How would I ever be able to understand all these non-white people? At the back of my mind was the fear that I wouldn't be able to understand most of the white people either, since they were of different a class to me, were, mainly, much older, and to make matters worse, many were not even English. In fact, these problems imposed themselves so heavily on me that I abandoned the study after a couple of years, and didn't resume it, in a rather different form, until twenty more years had passed.

If I had adopted another theory of identity, I might have felt more confident. This is what a young, female researcher of African-Caribbean origin had to say about her own research on older African-Caribbean women in London: while 'a shared colonial and cultural legacy resulted in black subjects feeling less defensive . . . when interviewed by black researchers', to confine the issue to colour similarities 'underestimates the dynamic and fluid intersections of "race", class and gender in

effecting the research process, and makes the false assumption that there is 'one truth' to be obtained in understanding how people construct their experience' (Reynolds (1997), quoted in Farrar (2001)). Tracey Reynolds adopts the epistemological point about 'truth' which I made just now, but the issue to be stressed now is her focus on the 'dynamic and fluid intersections of "race", class and gender' in the formation of identity and in the encounters between people who, physiologically, are different to each other. I don't want to suggest that these differences are not real. As Reynolds says, to have things in common with the person you talk to may well be helpful, particularly in the first, and often crucial, moments of your meeting. It goes without saying that Dr Kalsi's research on the Sikhs of Leeds was enormously assisted by sharing the Sikh identity with those he was studying. And Dr Hylton's work on the African-Caribbean groups in Leeds was clearly assisted by his personal and physical identification with the African diaspora. But skin colour, in fact, may not be the crucial dimension affecting research on matters associated with ethnicity. For example, the factor of class intruded when the black researcher TL Whitehead studied a Jamaican group. Whitehead was positioned by his low-income informants as 'big' (i.e. high status), 'brown' (i.e. 'light skin colour with desirable economic and social characteristics') and 'pretty-talking' (i.e. he spoke in standard English). The result was, he recorded, that many would not speak directly to him or would answer with meaningless 'yes, sirs' and 'no, sirs' (Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) cited in Farrar (2001)). Or political allegiances may intrude – I well remember Sewa telling me of his profound political differences with some other members of his 'community', and I would be surprised if he managed to completely supercede such differences when it came to doing his research. And Carl has recorded the fact that sharing skin colour and cultural and political history with African-Caribbeans in Chapeltown by no means automatically confers inclusion into this 'community' (Hylton (1997) quoted in Farrar 2001).

It seems to me, in conclusion, that researchers in this field benefit most from working with a model of identity which stresses its formation and reformation as similarities and differences between people play themselves out in everyday life. The initial similarities, of class, gender, ethnicity, politics, age, sexuality, which we

identify between us on our initial meetings, may well slip over into differences as one or more of these dimensions become prioritised. And our priorities will change as time goes by. I returned to my research at a time when I felt that my identity differences with people in Chapeltown whose skin colours and cultures were different from mine had slipped away, being replaced in the majority of cases by identification of what we had in common. These commonalities cannot ever be claimed as absolute, or as determinant; differences remain and both similarities and differences will shift over time. But it is a mistake to assume that any feature is an essential, determining and historically permanent constituent of identity. This process is one of flux (it is not, contrary to the view of some postmodern theories of identity, one of fragmentation and perpetual change). The point is that identities are composed of innumerable elements, so many that I prefer the term 'identifications'. These identifications are durable, shifting gradually over time. This, I believe, is a source for great optimism in both the research process and in the wider society. In research, it makes possible the crossing of all sorts of boundaries between people which hitherto have been thought to be insuperable, resulting in new information being revealed and new perspectives being formed. In the wider society, it gives us grounds to be confident that racism and exclusion can be overcome. I'd like to hope that our meeting today has helped us make progress towards both of those goals.

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