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# Researching Ethnicity, Identity, Subjectivity: Anything but the Four Lettered Word

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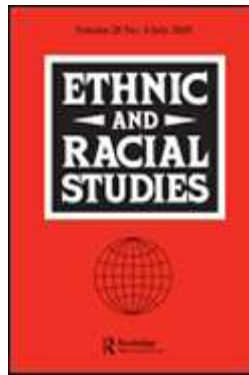
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## Researching Ethnicity, Identity, Subjectivity: Anything but the Four Lettered Word

The article gives a frank account of how anthropological research on Cape Verdean migrant experiences of parenthood in Portugal developed from avoiding the use of the analytical concept of 'race' to encountering 'race' as a category of practice in fieldwork and discusses the implications of this for analyzing the data. Although the aim of the research was to look beyond categorizations, to explore the emotional dimensions of lived experience, the effects of 'racial automatisms' upon migrant subjectivities cannot be ignored. Racist effects are nonetheless distinguished from racist intentions. The ethnography elucidates the political potential of 'race' to foment critical reflection upon the relationship between an individual's personal and collective identities.

Key words: Cape Verde, immigrants, identity, racial identification, racism, emotions

### Introduction

As a mother who had enjoyed two home births in the United Kingdom and 'suffered' a hospital birth in Portugal, I was familiar with the disempowering effects of medicalisation and decided to research Cape Verdean women's experiences in Portugal. Their ability to secure a degree of control over the birth process was likely to be further compromised by the fact that they were foreigners, immigrants, Cape Verdean, African....Clearly, implicit in my reasoning were some ideas about 'race' and 'racism' but I did not use either of these terms in my research proposal. It did not even cross my mind to mention 'race' because I had long left it behind as a useful concept. Having learnt my anthropological lesson, regarding the arbitrariness of phenotypic classifications (Wade 1993) and concurring with the deconstruction of Afro-centrism (Gilroy 1993), I had no time for the unpleasant colonial connotations of 'race'.

Notions of 'race' are integral to identity formation and viewing race as a social construction enables us to examine the ways in which ex-colonized people

1  
2  
3 have been racialized as ‘other’ and how this impacts upon their sense of self. Yet,  
4  
5 I did not want this to be the central focus of my work. I feared that researching  
6  
7 racism would result in examinations of counter-identities readily available for  
8  
9 even more social deconstruction. I was tired of the constructivist approach that  
10  
11 had dominated identity studies. Keen to avoid engaging in ping-pong  
12  
13 deconstructions of oppositional categories, I intended to engage, at a deeper level,  
14  
15 with the subjectivities of the women’s experiences and so naively dismissed the  
16  
17 four lettered word ‘race’ from my mind. I later realized that the omission of ‘race’  
18  
19 had a name - *new racism* - critiqued by anti-racist scholars, for contributing to a  
20  
21 blind universalism which overlooks difference in the name of equality or  
22  
23 humanism<sup>1</sup>. As a European white scholar, my dismissal of ‘race’ thus gained an  
24  
25 unpleasant significance, contrary to my intentions.  
26  
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31  
32 This article discusses the different ways in which ‘race’ and ‘racism’  
33  
34 emerged in the fieldwork and explore its significance for the study of subjectivity.  
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36

### 37 **Researching ‘Cape Verdeans’ in Porto**

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42  
43 The original aim was to focus on the intercultural context of childbirth for Cape  
44  
45 Verdean women. The exploratory interviews conducted raised a wider range of  
46  
47 issues such as economic hardship, childcare, and dealing with state bureaucracy  
48  
49 which offered equally rich ethnographic material as that of the birth process. The  
50  
51 fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews and accompanying women in their  
52  
53 appointments with health professionals, social workers and state officials. I also  
54  
55 interviewed Cape Verdean fathers.  
56  
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58

59  
60 Despite turning my back on ‘race’, in the choice of Cape Verdean  
immigrant mothers as a category of analysis, there was an underlying assumption

1  
2  
3 that the data would generate subjective experiences of 'racism'. Aware of this  
4 contradiction; it did not worry me because, as a researcher, I felt 'protected' by  
5 the privileged insights gained from subscribing to the alternative analytical  
6 concept of 'ethnicity' which had a feel good ring to it and 'avoided the nasty  
7 baggage that the concept of race brought with it' (Wade 2002:3). As Banton  
8 explains, (cited in Cashmore 2003:143) the difference between an ethnic group  
9 and a 'race' is that 'the former reflects the positive tendencies of identification and  
10 inclusion where the latter reflects the negative tendencies of dissociation and  
11 exclusion.' With an appeased conscience, I could then focus my attention on  
12 'subjectivity', knowing where I stood in relation to 'race' and 'ethnicity'.  
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27           What about identity? Brubaker's (2004:4) description of the concept's  
28 analytical impasse – meaning too much in a 'strong' positivist sense and too little  
29 in a 'weak' constructivist sense – helped me to understand my own dwindling  
30 lack of interest in researching 'identity'. Subjectivity, on the other hand, appeared  
31 to constitute a more promising concept for an 'experience-near' analysis of  
32 immigrant motherhood, going beyond categorizations to explore 'depth of  
33 personhood' (Biehl, Byron and Kleinman: 2007:13) through the 'inner dialogue'  
34 (Archer 2000). Yet, just because I had kept the analytical concept of 'race' at bay,  
35 this did not mean that I could ignore its social life in the field.  
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48           At the onset of fieldwork, I was faced with the challenge of how to contact  
49 Cape Verdean women. There are hardly any Cape Verdean neighbourhoods in  
50 Porto, due to a social housing programme that relocated Cape Verdeans  
51 throughout the town.  
52  
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57           Initial contacts were made through a Cape Verdean Association in Porto  
58 and the University Chaplaincy that had provided financial support to single  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 mother students. The Chaplaincy put me in contact with James Beard, an  
4  
5 anthropologist who was in the final stages of his fieldwork on African immigrants  
6  
7 in Porto. He offered to take me to African hairdressers to distribute a flier I had  
8  
9 produced to advertise my research. These initial contacts marked the beginning of  
10  
11 my re-awakening to the concept of 'race'.  
12  
13  
14

### 15 16 17 18 *A Gentle Nagging* 19

20  
21  
22  
23 A researcher quoted in Darlington and Scott (2002:85) had included a graphic on  
24  
25 her flier so that the homeless people in her study would associate it with her work  
26  
27 without having to read any text. Inspired by this idea, I used a picture of a  
28  
29 pregnant 'African' woman from a magazine on the internet. She wore a long  
30  
31 swaying dress, in pale green, standing sideways in an artistic pose, with her right  
32  
33 hand on her swollen stomach. A rectangular hand bag hung off her left shoulder  
34  
35 and her hand rested on its patterned fabric, displaying a thick golden colored  
36  
37 bangle. A wide head band, made of the same fabric as the handbag, pushed her  
38  
39 hair back and up into a bunch of thick black curls and she wore large oval shaped  
40  
41 golden ear rings. Her facial features were displayed in an artistic silhouette form  
42  
43 in pale brown. Underneath this image, I briefly introduced the research and  
44  
45 myself.  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

51  
52 Aware that I could face copyright problems, should I wish to publish an  
53  
54 article with a copy of the flier, I also asked a Portuguese artist friend if she could  
55  
56 produce a similar picture. Ana produced an image of a pregnant woman standing  
57  
58 slightly sideways, wearing a pick tunic and jeans, her left arm cradling a young  
59  
60 child at her side whose head was decorated with a number of small plaits. She had

1  
2  
3 a discreet grey handbag, small ear ring and blue head band that framed her face  
4  
5 which revealed bright pink thick lips, wide nostrils and piercing brown eyes. Ana  
6  
7 explained that she had found the magazine picture I sent her too exotic and had  
8  
9 decided to produce something more natural.  
10  
11

12  
13         Unsure which image was best, I used them both and in subsequent  
14  
15 meetings with different women found that the majority preferred the original  
16  
17 image, although some women preferred Ana's picture. The images were generally  
18  
19 seen to represent 'European' Africans versus 'African' Africans which brought to  
20  
21 mind Meintel's (1984) picture tests of racial classifications in Cape Verde.  
22  
23

24  
25         The women I met in the hairdressers came from a range of African  
26  
27 countries. 'We are all African', claimed one woman. 'The Angolan community is  
28  
29 much bigger' affirmed another. I declined their invitations to include other  
30  
31 nationalities in the study, on the grounds that a boundary had to be drawn which  
32  
33 also ran the risk of imposing unsolicited inclusions. Several women refused to  
34  
35 participate in my study and I wondered whether labelling them as 'Cape Verdean'  
36  
37 jarred with their own 'internal definitions' (Jenkins 1994). I also knew that I was  
38  
39 guilty of what Brubaker (2004:8) calls 'groupism': '...the tendency to treat ethnic  
40  
41 groups, nations and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can  
42  
43 be attributed'. Did these women experience the 'Cape Verdean' label as an  
44  
45 obstacle to their integration into Portuguese society?  
46  
47  
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49

50  
51         Despite my academic condemnation of phenotype as a basis for 'racial'  
52  
53 classification, there were occasions when I approached 'African' looking women  
54  
55 to ask them whether they were Cape Verdean. On another occasion, I failed to talk  
56  
57 to a Cape Verdean mother in a party because the paleness of her skin led me to  
58  
59 believe she was European. Although I dismissed this embarrassing incident in my  
60

1  
2  
3 mind as a missed opportunity to meet another Cape Verdean mother, I knew that  
4  
5 the issue of race was gently nagging. Deconstructing the category of 'Cape  
6  
7 Verdean' women was a necessary theoretical challenge although it also sometimes  
8  
9 clashed with the practical need to meet 'Cape Verdean' women in the field.  
10  
11

### 12 13 *Encountering 'Race' in the Field*

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18 The vignettes described below, from fieldwork conducted between April 2008 and  
19  
20 May 2009, reveal the need to address 'race' and 'racism' as part of a broader  
21  
22 framework for examining the interplay between collective identities and  
23  
24 individual subjectivities.  
25  
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27

### 28 29 30 'It is important to show who you are'

31  
32  
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34  
35 Joaquim, eager to return to Cape Verde, claimed people's view of Africa is  
36  
37 conditioned by the bad news on television. (The head of the army and the  
38  
39 president of Guinea-Bissau had both been assassinated days before and gruesome  
40  
41 images of vestiges of the president's brutal assassination had appeared on the  
42  
43 television). Joaquim gave an example of the 'silly' questions that his colleagues at  
44  
45 university – 'educated people', he hastened to add - had asked him. 'Does Cape  
46  
47 Verde have roads?' In the gymnasium, someone had asked what kind of clothes  
48  
49 they wore in Cape Verde and Joaquim had replied that they wore the same as the  
50  
51 Portuguese, or better.  
52  
53  
54

55  
56 I enquired whether he had experienced any racism. Joaquim replied, 'not  
57  
58 really racism but rather prejudice'. He claimed not to have many problems  
59  
60 because he was very positive by nature and knew how to get on with people,



1  
2  
3 adding that it is important to show who you are. His colleagues at university were  
4  
5 very impressed when he received high grades. When he had the same grade as a  
6  
7 Portuguese colleague, they were more impressed with him because he was black  
8  
9 and ‘managed to do it’. Later, I asked what the difference was between racism and  
10  
11 prejudice and after thinking for a while Joaquim replied, ‘Prejudice is not the right  
12  
13 word, it is more a question of fear’.  
14  
15

16  
17  
18  
19  
20 ‘See (what I mean)?’  
21

22  
23  
24 Silvia stood, in her local health centre, with her two year old daughter, near a  
25  
26 door, out of which came a nurse.  
27

28  
29 ‘Who’s next?’  
30

31  
32 ‘It’s me’ replied Silvia, ‘I did not bother to pull out a ticket because  
33  
34 nobody else was here’.  
35

36  
37 The nurse turned to look at a young white man standing behind us who  
38  
39 held up a ticket. ‘But you should have’ he replied and after hesitating for a  
40  
41 moment, signalled to the young man to go in and asked Silvia to wait for the other  
42  
43 nurses.  
44

45  
46 ‘See?’ she said in a tone of contempt.  
47

48  
49 We had been talking about how Silvia did not want to stay in Portugal  
50  
51 because she did not feel able to realize her full potential. In the chemist where she  
52  
53 works, she claimed that she had no chances of progressing in her career because,  
54  
55 even though she had acquired Portuguese nationality, she was still seen as a  
56  
57 foreigner. Maybe back in Cape Verde she could open her own chemist.  
58  
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1  
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3 After we had left the health centre, Silvia mentioned the nurse's attitude  
4 again: 'He was rather rude, don't you think? But, you know, he was always like  
5 that. Last time he was unable to weigh Cláudia because she wouldn't let him. I  
6 didn't lose out by having the other nurses'.  
7  
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12 It was impossible to know whether the nurse would have acted differently  
13 if Silvia had been a white Portuguese woman or if the young man had been in  
14 Silvia's position. There were not only issues of race and gender to be considered  
15 here. What had gone through the nurse's own mind whilst he hesitated? Was he  
16 contemplating the prospects of failing to weigh the little girl once more? I only  
17 had access to Silvia's thoughts which suggested that she had interpreted his  
18 actions as 'racist'. Yet, since I did not ask her directly, I could not be sure. So a  
19 few days later, I sent her a text and asked if she had felt that his behaviour could  
20 be seen as slightly racist. She replied as follows:  
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34 'I don't think it was due to racism. He is just like that, he is unpleasant, but  
35 I think it is just him, poor thing'.  
36  
37  
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41 'I suggest you remove the words "black race"'  
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45

46 A paediatrician I met whilst accompanying a Cape Verdean mother to an  
47 appointment in a health centre expressed a keen interest to become involved on a  
48 voluntary basis in my work. Frustrated by the small number of babies referred to  
49 her by her colleagues – who were all general practitioners - she decided to  
50 formulate a formal request to her superiors to set aside one day a week for Cape  
51 Verdean infants. The paediatrician sent me a draft of the letter by email and told  
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3 me to feel free to suggest any amendments. I suggested eliminating the words  
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5  
6 'black race' from the following text:

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8  
9  
10 ...The applicant is available, as a Paediatrician, for:  
11 - Health evaluation related to possible pathologies prevalent in the black  
12 race and region of origin - Cape Verde...  
13  
14

15  
16 I hesitated before sending the mail, not only for fear of offending her, but  
17  
18 also because I had no idea what the current situation was regarding the  
19  
20 relationship between 'race' and medical genetic research. I had some vague ideas  
21  
22 about the IQ tests in the Bell Curve by Herrnstein and Murray (in Hacking 2005)  
23  
24 and this in the end gave me the courage to send the mail.  
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30 'They do their best to treat you correctly'  
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35 Diana invited me to accompany her to the immigration authorities for the renewal  
36  
37 of her visa which had expired nearly a year ago. She was finding it difficult to  
38  
39 explain, in Portuguese, to the satisfaction of the immigration authorities, the  
40  
41 complex circumstances that had led to this situation. 'I feel shy' she explained to  
42  
43 me, in Creole, 'I can't express everything that I feel. Portuguese is our official  
44  
45 language, but there are certain words that may be different to theirs and they don't  
46  
47 understand what I want to say'.  
48  
49  
50

51  
52 Diana believed that if I accompanied her she would be treated better.  
53  
54 'When you come with a white person, they think that the companion is an  
55  
56 educated person and so they do their best to treat you correctly'. I had noted, on  
57  
58 occasions, how officials tended to direct their words more to me than to the  
59  
60 women concerned.

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6 'There is no need to involve a white person in our affairs'  
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10 The president of the Cape Verdean Association made this statement, in private, to  
11 Diana during my brief absence from his office. I had taken Diana there to see if  
12 she qualified for food aid distributed by the association. Diana only disclosed his  
13 words to me months later, after I had helped to resolve problems with renewing  
14 her visa: 'Black people's problems, we resolve amongst ourselves'.  
15  
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22 The president had made no efforts to introduce me to the Cape Verdean  
23 mothers he knew and I had presumed, at first, it was because he was too busy.  
24 Diana's confiding of the president's words helped me to understand the first time  
25 he had actively attempted to obstruct my work, at a later date, when the president  
26 tried to prevent me from speaking at the Cape Verdean Christmas show.  
27  
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34 During one of the intervals, it occurred to me to suggest to a mother that  
35 she ask the president if we could speak together about our group. She returned  
36 with a blank expression on her face, reporting that he had refused but had offered  
37 to allocate a time for the group to meet, at the association headquarters. (The  
38 group had its own meeting place in a home for single mothers where three Cape  
39 Verdean women lived and which had a playroom for the children). I decided to  
40 approach the president myself. Once again he refused on the grounds that last  
41 minute initiatives were unacceptable; they would delay the scheduled  
42 performances which were already behind time. I pointed out that nothing was  
43 happening at that moment and that it would not even take five minutes to talk. He  
44 still refused. I then replied that for me this was a golden opportunity for my  
45 research to meet more women and he finally agreed, telling me to stand by the  
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3 door and wait for his signal. He then disappeared. Time went by, nothing  
4  
5 happened. I approached a woman who was standing on the stage, wistfully  
6  
7 holding a microphone, waiting to present the next performance. I asked if we  
8  
9 could speak and she replied that the president had not given us authorization. I  
10  
11 assured her that he had changed his mind but she said that without speaking with  
12  
13 him, she could not override his decision. I stood waiting on the stage, with a Cape  
14  
15 Verdean mother until the president emerged, nodded his head in our direction and  
16  
17 we were handed the microphone and began to talk. Suddenly loud music came out  
18  
19 through the curtains behind us, drowning out our words. We popped our heads  
20  
21 back stage and the music was switched off. When we finished talking and walked  
22  
23 past the president, he said to me 'You will have to pay me a thousand dollars for  
24  
25 this'.  
26  
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34 'Democracy works for Europeans, not for Africans'

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36  
37  
38 One Saturday afternoon group meeting, we had arranged to exchange infants'  
39  
40 clothes. Whilst I approached Porto in my car, it was pouring with rain. I began to  
41  
42 receive text messages from mothers asking for lifts to the meeting. Not totally  
43  
44 familiar with Porto, I lost my way in the process of giving lifts, arriving over an  
45  
46 hour late, with a carful of mothers and their babies and two suitcases of clothes. I  
47  
48 noted that a Cape Verdean father and his Portuguese wife were attending for the  
49  
50 first time. Somewhat stressed by the whole situation, I emptied out the suitcases  
51  
52 and everyone started looking at the clothes. This set the tone for the rest of the  
53  
54 meeting after which it became difficult to hold our planned group discussion.  
55  
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3 At the end of our uncharacteristically disorganised meeting, Tiago – the  
4  
5 first father to participate in a meeting – sat down beside me and suggested that  
6  
7 next time it might be better to leave the freebies until the end. Embarrassed by my  
8  
9 shambolic ‘performance’, I showed him the open ended questionnaire I had  
10  
11 prepared on possible activities for the group and had completely forgotten to hand  
12  
13 out. He praised my initiative but then went on to say that if I wanted anything to  
14  
15 happen at all then I would have to take more control over the whole process.  
16  
17 Tiago told me that Africans are like sheep, they need a leader to follow and  
18  
19 suggested that I set an agenda for the meeting and allocate tasks to people:  
20  
21 ‘Democracy works for Europeans, not for Africans’. He asked me if I knew the  
22  
23 president of the Cape Verdean Association and told me that his was a good  
24  
25 example to follow.  
26  
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34 “Sampajudu” is more beautiful

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38 I interviewed Sara on a bench in the park because she did not want me to go to her  
39  
40 home where she had fallen out with her neighbours. They had all got on well  
41  
42 before her partner had left her, pregnant, for another woman, with whom he was  
43  
44 also expecting a baby. But Sara’s failure to tell them her ‘*badiu*’ husband had left  
45  
46 was interpreted as an indication of the typical superiority complex of the  
47  
48 ‘sampajudu’. Now, whenever she put foot outside of her shelter, her ‘*badiu*’  
49  
50 neighbours called her names. ‘You have lived in Cape Verde’, she remarked ‘so I  
51  
52 don’t need to tell you about the rivalry that exists between *sampajudu* and *badiu*’.  
53  
54  
55  
56

57  
58 ‘*Sampajudu*’ is used to designate the Cape Verdeans originated from the  
59  
60 windward islands and ‘*Badiu*’ to refer to the Cape Verdeans from the leeward

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2  
3 islands which have a stronger African influence. Sara, daughter of a *sampajudu*  
4  
5 and *badiu*, born in the windward island of São Vicente, identified herself as  
6  
7 *sampajudu* and went on to explain the rivalry to me in the following terms:  
8  
9

10           ‘They are jealous because *sampajudu* is more beautiful. *Sampajudu* is  
11  
12 white, blue, green eyes, thinner hair...’  
13  
14

15           ‘Oh, they say that *sampajudu* is more beautiful?’  
16  
17

18           ‘No, *sampajudu* is more beautiful. I don’t know if you know but *Badiu* has  
19  
20 thicker hair’.  
21

22           The day following our interview, Sara sent me a text message claiming  
23  
24 that she had had a row with a neighbour who had seen her with me and exclaimed  
25  
26 ‘you’re friends with a white woman; I am going to make your life hell’.  
27  
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### 30 **Making Sense of the Data**

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35           How am I to make sense of these encounters with ‘race’? Firstly, they reveal the  
36  
37 impossibility of ignoring the influence of race as a ‘category of practice’  
38  
39 (Brubaker 2004:31) upon the ways in which social actors make sense of  
40  
41 themselves and of others. Secondly, they serve to question the notion that racist  
42  
43 behaviour is synonymous with racist intent.  
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### 48 *Automatic Responses*

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52

53           Let us consider the case of Sara which portrays the racial disharmony between  
54  
55 *badiu* and *sampajudu* as a cultural given. Sara’s description of the inferiority of  
56  
57 the *badiu* phenotype corroborates Meintel’s (1984:104) findings regarding the  
58  
59 existence of ‘a value-laden hierarchy in which ‘white’ skin and features are  
60

1  
2  
3 aesthetically superior to 'black' ones'. Yet, we know that relations with her *badiu*  
4  
5 neighbours, with whom she lived in close proximity, were agreeable until Sara's  
6  
7 neighbours took offence by her refusal to share the misfortune of her private life  
8  
9 with them. Sara had failed to meet the unspoken social expectations of reciprocity  
10  
11 that may develop amidst neighbours living in precarious conditions in such close  
12  
13 proximity. It could thus be argued that the easiest way for Sara's neighbours to  
14  
15 make sense of her silence and for Sara to understand their reactions was to take  
16  
17 recourse to racial stereotypes due to what Brubakaer calls the 'hyperaccessibility'  
18  
19 of ethnic schemas for interpreting the social world which crowds out the  
20  
21 possibility of alternative interpretations. He suggests that it may be more fruitful  
22  
23 to view the deployment of racial stereotypes as a 'quasi-automatic  
24  
25 unselfconscious process' that is 'triggered' in particular contexts which may not  
26  
27 necessarily indicate a 'need to feel superior to others' (2004:72-78).  
28  
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34 Desai's poignant study of Asian masculinities in Britain provides a  
35  
36 fascinating example of how the 'trigger' for racialised interpretations is not to be  
37  
38 found in rational deployments of the concept of 'race' but rather in 'embodied  
39  
40 processes which by-pass rational thought' (1999:32).  
41  
42

43 Desai takes recourse to Bourdieu (1984) on bodily memory for analysing  
44  
45 the ways in which individual bodily gestures symbolize other gestures and  
46  
47 practices so that a simple 'look' may evoke a particular kind of masculine identity  
48  
49 that challenges the power of another man from a rival group and thus triggers an  
50  
51 act of violence between white and Bengali young men without even the need for  
52  
53 recourse to verbal conflict (1999:253). Desai argues that the analyst must be wary  
54  
55 of imputing too much substance to the racialised interpretations of social actors  
56  
57 for fear of missing what else is going on (1999:20).  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Was 'racial motivation' the real cause of the association president's words  
4  
5 or is this another example of the hyperaccessibility of 'ethnic competition schemas'  
6  
7 (Brubaker 2004:78)? Did my insistence upon being allowed to talk in public with  
8  
9 my embodied presence upon the stage 'trigger' historical memories of colonial  
10  
11 domination? How were gender relations at work here? Did my insistence also  
12  
13 challenge the president's masculinity?  
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17 Although I cannot answer all of these questions, more context of what else  
18  
19 was going on may shed some light on the matter. The president made it no secret  
20  
21 that his position constituted a spring board for the potential acquisition of a  
22  
23 political post in his planned return to Cape Verde. In this respect, he could see me  
24  
25 as an obstacle or potential rival by weakening his command over the Cape  
26  
27 Verdean Diaspora in Porto, irrespective of whether I was 'black' or 'white'. The  
28  
29 experience of a young black Cape Verdean male student gives weight to this  
30  
31 interpretation. Having written a dissertation for his degree on African associations  
32  
33 in Porto, the student commented to me that he had given up on the president who  
34  
35 had been of no help whatsoever and had only displayed interest in him as a  
36  
37 potential source of labour. By separating out intentionality from effect, we may  
38  
39 thus conclude that the president's motivation for making his racist comments  
40  
41 about whites was not due to pure racism.  
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48 How are we to interpret Tiago's comments on democracy? Firstly, his  
49  
50 words need to be understood within the context of Cape Verde's political history.  
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52

53 Cape Verde, which gained independence from Portugal in 1975, is a  
54  
55 young democracy. The first multi-party elections took place in 1991. I describe  
56  
57 elsewhere (Challinor 2005) how the habitus of single party politics continued  
58  
59 some time after the change of regime. The polarization of Cape Verdean  
60

1  
2  
3 democracy, between the two major parties, continues to be the subject of debate.  
4  
5 In a conference given by Jorge Fonseca - a former independent candidate to the  
6  
7 presidency of Cape Verde - in May 2009, in Porto, Fonseca testified to the on-  
8  
9 going political polarization of social life which he exemplified by stating that even  
10  
11 at a wedding people are likely to ask you whether you are MPD<sup>2</sup> or PAICV<sup>3</sup>. He  
12  
13 added that if you claim to be independent, people will still insist that you have to  
14  
15 say which party you are more inclined towards. His remarks were met with  
16  
17 laughter in the audience and a young Cape Verdean student sitting next to me  
18  
19 exclaimed 'It's true!'  
20  
21  
22  
23

24  
25 Secondly, the specific circumstances of a disorganised meeting also  
26  
27 provide a clue, bringing to mind the literature on the paradoxes inherent in the  
28  
29 ideal of non-directive participatory processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The line  
30  
31 between facilitation and manipulation is often difficult to draw. The motivation  
32  
33 behind Tiago's decision to give advice was to help the group to function more  
34  
35 effectively: people need to be told what to do. The easiest way to get his message  
36  
37 across to me that I shouldn't be afraid of giving out orders was to argue that  
38  
39 democracy was culturally inappropriate for Africans. The *effects* of his pep talk  
40  
41 may nonetheless be seen as racist: construing Africans to be inferior to Europeans  
42  
43 because they are incapable of taking initiatives on their own. His advice also set  
44  
45 him apart from the average African, implicitly claiming a superior status for  
46  
47 himself. Originally *badiu*, he did not speak in Crioule to his young daughter, born  
48  
49 to a Portuguese mother who expressed concern in the group of how to expose her  
50  
51 daughter to Cape Verdean culture.  
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57  
58 The automatisms examined by Brubaker and Desai help to understand how  
59  
60 situations and events may unexpectedly become racialised in a wide range of

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3 different contexts and warn against imputing too much intentionality when social  
4  
5 actors take recourse to racist resources.  
6

7  
8 My impulse to suggest to the paediatrician that she remove the words  
9  
10 'black race' from her letter may also be seen as a quasi-automatic response by an  
11  
12 anthropologist distrustful of the four lettered word.  
13  
14

15 I don't know whether my advice was taken on board or not (neither of us  
16  
17 commented upon the issue) but I have since learnt that medical research indicates  
18  
19 that there may be grounds for talking of a 'race-targeted' as opposed to 'race-  
20  
21 based' medicine (Hacking 2005).  
22  
23

24 Hacking's claim that 'race' may be a valuable indicator of the potential  
25  
26 effectiveness of a drug is worth consideration since it need not be interpreted as a  
27  
28 sign of genetic determinism. In his thoughtful study (2002) on the dialectic  
29  
30 relationship between culture and nature, Wade points out that the identification of  
31  
32 predictable and consistent patterns – such as the higher blood pressure of African  
33  
34 American men – is not only about biology but also about consistent patterns in the  
35  
36 cultural context. Whilst this may come of no surprise to the anthropologist,  
37  
38 naturally allergic to biological essentialisms, (forgive the provocative metaphor),  
39  
40 Wade's point is that not all biologists subscribe to them either and that there are  
41  
42 currents within the discipline that examine how 'human biology is constituted  
43  
44 through social processes' (Wade, 2002:115). The argument is taken further by  
45  
46 Ingold who claims that differences between cultures '*are themselves biological*'  
47  
48 since 'they emerge in the process of development of the human organism in its  
49  
50 environment' ([Ingold, 2000:379] cited in Wade, 2002:115).  
51  
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57 Yet, if social actors are more than what culture and biology make of them,  
58  
59 this is due to the human capacity to reflect upon society and nature.  
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7 *The Reflexive Self*  
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10  
11 My focus on subjectivity signals an attempt to apprehend the emotional  
12 dimensions of lived experience but it is not intended as a narrow pseudo-  
13 psychological approach towards self-understanding. On the contrary, it aims to  
14 explore the ways in which the collective and the individual are intertwined.  
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21 Archer (2000:195, 10) defines emotions as ‘commentaries upon our  
22 concerns’, arguing that ‘we are who we are because of what we care about’.  
23 Choices have to be made, primary concerns need to be separated from secondary  
24 concerns and this is achieved through the never-ending ‘inner conversation’ which  
25 tests our commitments against our different emotional commentaries. It is the self  
26 that arbitrates upon the relative importance of different commitments,  
27 conditioned, but not determined, by the self’s involuntary placement in the world:  
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40 ...the “I” may be distressed to learn that its “Me” is considered...to be of a  
41 disfavoured colour or gender, and that nothing “I” can immediately do will  
42 change matters...As a reflexive monitor, the “I” may squirm inwardly to  
43 distance itself from the disfavoured “Me”...(2000:264-265).  
44  
45

46  
47 The ‘inner conversation’, part of the process of constructing one’s  
48 subjectivity, is inseparable from social structures and interactions. We have seen  
49 how the ‘I’ of José, Silvia and Diana had to deal with the ‘external definitions’  
50 (Jenkins 1994) of their ‘Me’. Racial automatisms may thus be seen to be a part of  
51 the social structure that impacts upon subjectivities. In the words of Brubaker  
52 (2004:86):  
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3 The domain of the “mental” is not identical with the domain of the  
4 individual...the schemes of perception and interpretation through which  
5 the social world is experienced in racial, ethnic or national terms – is social  
6 in a double sense: *it is socially shared knowledge of social objects*  
7 (emphasis in original).  
8  
9

10  
11 And yet this socially shared knowledge may also be disputed. In certain  
12 circumstances the self evaluates schemes of perception in terms of its primary and  
13 secondary concerns. Diana’s readiness to share with me the association  
14 president’s ‘dispensing of whites’, for example, suggests that the ‘ethnic  
15 competition schema’ that the president had invoked failed to engage her.  
16  
17

18  
19 Joaquim’s statement ‘you have to show who you are’ demonstrates a  
20 conscious attempt to overcome the obstructions caused by external, racial  
21 categorizations. His words also reveal Joaquim’s personal identity at work -  
22 tending to its self-worth in society. Both Silvia and Diana testify to José’s  
23 experience of having to deal with the effects of external categorization upon their  
24 agency and sense of self. Diana claimed that the mere presence of a white person  
25 accompanying her guaranteed superior quality of assistance and Silvia believed  
26 she was unable to progress in her career because she was not originally  
27 Portuguese.  
28  
29

30  
31 The changes in Silvia’s reactions to the nurse’s behaviour provide a  
32 window into the workings of the ‘internal conversation’ (Archer 2000),  
33 elucidating the dialectical relationship between external racialised categories and  
34 subjectivities. Silvia’s comment, ‘See (what I mean?)’ suggests that her initial  
35 perception of the nurse’s behaviour was conditioned by previous experiences in  
36 which she felt she had been treated unfairly for not being Portuguese. Her initial  
37 reaction to the nurse’s behaviour could thus be seen as an automatic racialised  
38 response to previous subjective experiences of ‘racism’. Silvia’s personal identity  
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3 was protesting against the lack of recognition of her self-worth in Portuguese  
4  
5 society. My questioning whether she felt the nurse's behaviour had been racist  
6  
7 provided an opportunity to engage with her 'inner conversation' which led her to  
8  
9 change her mind.  
10  
11

12           Joaquim's feeling that he posed a threat to his colleagues' own sense of  
13  
14 self by challenging their 'racial automatisms' regarding the inferior capacities of  
15  
16 blacks may be interpreted in the light of Suleri's (1992:6) analysis of how colonial  
17  
18 fear of its own cultural ignorance of India was fetishized into latent threats posed  
19  
20 by the 'other'. She claims the 'cultural exchanges' between ruler and ruled  
21  
22 produced a counter-culture that blurred the dividing line between 'self' and  
23  
24 'other'. Subscribing to the idea of an impenetrable 'other' helped to keep the  
25  
26 unsettling reality of these 'imperial intimacies' at bay. Upholding the myth of the  
27  
28 steadiness of imperial control consequently resulted in an anxious drive to  
29  
30 interpret the 'other' culture in the colonizers' own terms (1992:7).  
31  
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34  
35

36           The attempts to render Cape Verdean culture readable in their own terms,  
37  
38 by enquiring how people dressed and whether Cape Verde had roads also  
39  
40 appeared to jar on Joaquim's own sense of self, provoking indignation.  
41  
42

43           Mothers' and babies' names also produced reactions that invoked  
44  
45 'impenetrable otherness' (Suleri 1992). I observed several instances where doctors  
46  
47 and social workers commented upon mothers' and babies' 'weird' or 'unusual'  
48  
49 names. Several mothers answered to one name in their relations with Cape  
50  
51 Verdean friends and to another name in more formal relations. One mother  
52  
53 commented how she had stopped calling her son by his first name because her  
54  
55 Portuguese housemates, in the single mothers' home where she lived, had  
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1  
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3 complained that it was too difficult to pronounce. Now, she had become used to  
4  
5  
6 calling him by his second, typically Portuguese, name.  
7

8           Reflexivity does not only signify the human capacity to reflect upon one's  
9  
10 place within the world, but also, the capacity to seek to transform it. 'One of the  
11  
12 greatest of human powers is that we can subjectively conceive of re-making  
13  
14 society and ourselves' (Archer 2000:315). Commenting upon the lack of  
15  
16 acceptance, in Portuguese society, of mixed 'race' couples, a black Cape Verdean  
17  
18 father, who was expecting a baby with a white Portuguese woman, told me, with a  
19  
20 big smile on his face, 'the world is going to become a more colourful place'.  
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## 25 **Conclusion**

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30           Conducting research is like walking in a labyrinth of on-going  
31  
32 experimentation. I have attempted to portray a sense of this through discussing my  
33  
34 changing attitude towards the concept of 'race'. Cashmore (2003:334) claims it is  
35  
36 problematic to substitute 'race' for 'ethnicity' because the former constitutes an  
37  
38 important idiom for combating racism which may also be disguised in  
39  
40 ethnocentric claims to cultural rather than racial superiority. Distinguishing racist  
41  
42 motivation from racist effects constitutes, nonetheless, a significant analytical  
43  
44 nuance: if on the one hand it helps to see what else is happening, on the other  
45  
46 hand it suggests that racist attitudes can change. Tiago's Portuguese partner  
47  
48 commented to me that in the small town where they lived near Porto, it was  
49  
50 common to hear people say 'He is black *but* he is a good person'. Is this pure  
51  
52 racism or an indication of the 'personal commentator' questioning racial  
53  
54 stereotypes in the face of lived experience?  
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Whatever their intention may be, these kinds of comments can still be hurtful. This is evident in the following edited extract from an interview I conducted with Pedro who worked in a restaurant to finance his master's studies. In response to my question if he liked living in Portugal, he had complained about the police's tendency to stop black drivers.

Challinor: What about people in general? Do you feel they treat you well?

Pedro: Yes, I have Portuguese friends who treat me well but at work, there are others who come with an attitude, with a way of treating a black person that is different, but I usually notice immediately and then I speak up. I don't keep it to myself because I can't stand it.

Challinor: What do you normally say? Can you recall an incident?

Pedro: Well, where I work now there is a cleaner, she is so stupid that when the boss or one of the employees draws her attention to something that is not right she says 'oh do you think I am a black woman?' She sometimes says this in front of me! Once in the restaurant...we were all having lunch together...the cook's food that day was not very good...and she commented that she was now cooking for black men and women. She said this in front of me! Those kinds of things really affect me. I had to let it out; there are some things which you just can't accept.

Challinor: So what did you say?

Pedro: I told her she was just a cleaner, and that she is no better than any black woman anywhere and that no black woman has the bad manners that she has because if she were educated she wouldn't speak like that. Then she started to cry and apologized. This happened twice. She said it wasn't intended for me and she didn't mean to offend me. But what is this about? "You are not black. All my family is black. You don't need to speak directly to me. It is enough to say *black* and you have already shocked me". We used to be very good friends but then it all ended....There are lots of people who are scared and there are others who think that blacks are all the same, but in reality, this is not true because everyone is different. Each person has a completely different education, some people do good things, and others do bad things irrespective of whether they are black or white.

The inability of the Portuguese cleaner to understand why Pedro took offence and his refusal to accept her explanation demonstrate how the meanings of 'race' are not set in the structure of language but are activated through social interaction. The claims that her comments were not directed personally towards Pedro suggest that the cleaner was engaged in a non-reflexive process that drew on the racial stereotypes embedded in some popular Portuguese expressions.



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2  
3 Pedro's attempts to make the cleaner aware of how her words offended him, by  
4  
5 stating that all his family was black, reveal how, in this particular social  
6  
7 interaction, he was not prepared to dissociate his personal identity from a  
8  
9 collective black identity. He then went on to do this in his comments to me, on  
10  
11 how blacks are not all the same. Despite their arbitrariness, the phenotypical  
12  
13 markers of 'race', such as skin colour, function, in practice, as involuntary  
14  
15 embodiments of identification with imagined collective identities that are  
16  
17 embedded in (contested) colonial histories. When activated through social  
18  
19 relations, they may correspond, in some circumstances and not in others, to a  
20  
21 person's inner sense of self and belonging.  
22  
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26  
27 Too close a focus, in anthropology, on individual choice, risks losing sight  
28  
29 of how external racial categorizations force people against their will "into boxes  
30  
31 of singular identities" (Sen 2006:174). Whether the motivation for doing this is  
32  
33 racist or not, the effect may be the same.  
34  
35

36  
37 To ask the Cape Verdean women, in my research, which picture they liked  
38  
39 best, constituted an implicit request for them to choose the image they identified  
40  
41 themselves with most; was I not guilty here of fomenting what Sen calls 'the  
42  
43 illusion of single identity'? Why should the women have to choose at all? To do  
44  
45 so, in response to a research question, generates more questions regarding what  
46  
47 their choices signify. For those who preferred the more African looking woman is  
48  
49 this, for example, because she represents a more authentic identity, unsullied by  
50  
51 western influence? The term *badiu* was originally used to refer to the slaves who  
52  
53 escaped their Portuguese masters and went to live in remote parts of Santiago  
54  
55 Island. If, on the one hand, they were seen as backward, on the other, they also  
56  
57 represented Cape Verdean resistance to colonial rule. For those who preferred the  
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1  
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3 more European looking woman, was this because she represents progress or  
4  
5  
6 modernity? Wealthy black people in Cape Verde have been referred to, in their  
7  
8 local communities as ‘white by money’ (Meintel 1984:98). Meintel’s study  
9  
10 poignantly illustrates how the racial classification system in Cape Verde is made  
11  
12 up of a range of categories, activated in any given moment, according to the  
13  
14 context. Lobban (1995:147) claims that whether Cape Verdeans consider  
15  
16 themselves to be Western Africans, easternmost West Indians or Southern  
17  
18 Europeans “the answers depend on who is asked, when he or she is asked, who is  
19  
20 asking, and what the motivation is for asking in the first place”. The questions and  
21  
22 answers could take many routes.  
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26  
27 An interesting route to take, for this discussion, might be to consider  
28  
29 whether asking the women to choose between the two images evoked the  
30  
31 supposed rivalry between *sampajudu* and *badiu* referred to above, limiting their  
32  
33 perspectives. Sen (2006:178-9) argues that whilst ‘theorists see themselves as  
34  
35 “discovering” a confrontation, not creating – or adding to –one’, theories do  
36  
37 influence social thought and practice. It is for this reason that deconstructing  
38  
39 racial identifications is a theoretical necessity even if their social effects cannot  
40  
41 always be avoided. In my endeavour to delineate a field of enquiry - constituted  
42  
43 by the category of “Cape Verdean women” - I too became implicated in processes  
44  
45 that activated racial identifications. Perhaps, in the attempt to gain an ‘experience-  
46  
47 near’ analysis of people’s subjectivities, ‘race’ should neither be actively pursued  
48  
49 nor purposefully shunned.  
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54  
55 If I had adopted such an attitude, when I presented the images to the Cape  
56  
57 Verdean women, it would have probably led me to ask more open-ended  
58  
59 questions, such as, ‘What do you think of these pictures?’ This could pave the  
60

1  
2  
3 way forward for discovering new insights into the multiple allegiances (Sen 2006)  
4  
5 that impact upon Cape Verdean migrant subjectivities. Perhaps the women would  
6  
7 have commented upon the young girl with the plaits in her hair and the stylish  
8  
9 clothes of the more European looking woman which could have generated  
10  
11 discussions on hairstyle and fashion preferences. Was the girl an older daughter?  
12  
13 This could have led to talking about family and gender relations. Even if the  
14  
15 category of 'race' had still been activated, this more open-ended approach would  
16  
17 have provided a window into the different kinds of factors that influence the ways  
18  
19 race functions as a category of practice. Personal relationships, for example,  
20  
21 constitute a significant factor (Meintel 1984:98). Pedro's comments below  
22  
23 illustrate how embodied racial identifications may be played with, within the safe  
24  
25 confines of friendship.  
26  
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31  
32 Pedro: There are people who use the word black (*preto*) as an ugly word,  
33  
34 as a discriminating word and there are other cases where they don't  
35  
36 because I have friends who call me *preto*.

37 Challinor: And you are not offended?

38 Pedro: No, I'm not, because I know them.

39 Challinor: And you can call them "white"? "Hey, white man!"

40 Pedro: Exactly, that is what I do! With a man who is nearly sixty years  
41  
42 old; he was in Angola, he was in Mozambique, he has been in Cape Verde,  
43  
44 he was in the army...there we are playing, and it is different. But if the first  
45  
46 time I see someone they call me *preto*, someone with whom I don't have  
47  
48 much intimacy or whom I don't know very well, then I take this as an  
49  
50 offence...

51  
52 That Pedro should be able to develop a close friendship with a 'white' man  
53  
54 who had fought in the Portuguese colonial wars suggests that he was free from the  
55  
56 colonial chains of history with their blinding 'illusion of destiny' (Sen 2006). To  
57  
58 question the freedom people may have to choose their identity, should not blind us  
59  
60 to the relative freedom people may exercise 'regarding what *priority* to give to the  
various identities' (Sen 2006:38) that shape their individual subjectivities.

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2  
3 The Cape Verdeans in my study did not refer to themselves as an ethnic  
4 group. They classified themselves in terms of a national Cape Verdean identity  
5 often referring to themselves as ‘African immigrants’. Within the context of this  
6 study, ethnicity does not function as a category of practice and consequently  
7 serves as an analytical concept to investigate the processes through which  
8 collective social identities emerge. It keeps me at a comfortable disembodied  
9 distance from the subjects of my study. The same cannot be said of ‘race’. Its  
10 pervasiveness as a category of practice implicates researcher and researched alike.  
11 I am in agreement with Hirschman (2004: 410) that “Race without racism is an  
12 anachronism”. Yet, even as we dismiss it as an analytical concept, we should not  
13 rob it of its political potential to foment the kind of critical reflection – in the  
14 battle against racist ideas and behaviours, including those unmotivated by racist  
15 intent – that promotes ‘priority of reason’ and ‘freedom to think’ about the  
16 relationship between an individual’s personal and collective identities (Sen  
17 2006:161, 170). This, in my opinion, is what Pedro was trying to do in his  
18 confrontations with his Portuguese work colleague. Seen from this perspective,  
19 the more we reason about the implications of using the four lettered word, the  
20 better.  
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52 showing me around Porto and Ana Araújo for producing the image of an African mother.  
53  
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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I thank Charmaine Crawford for drawing attention to this.

<sup>2</sup> Movement for Democracy

<sup>3</sup> African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde

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