

INTERCHAPTER DIALOGUE

FOR CHAPTER 3

Chris: James, I wanted to point out that in your chapter, you explore the challenges of facing racism as a young person and how, as an adult, you've become concerned with the idea of reconciliation. Could you say more about how you define that term? What's the nature of reconciliation? Is it personal or psychological or communal, or all the above?

James: Yeah, so at a certain point of my doctoral studies, I was harboring some serious issues with race. It was hard to negotiate the fact that I had participated in anti-Black racism, but that I was personally a victim of racism as well. When I started doing interviews about race with people in my hometown for both the dissertation and the film project, I was really angry and suspicious. I had no idea how people from Grand Saline would interact with me. I worried because I was like, "These people are very racist!" It was also hard trying to code this data. But somewhere along the way, I realized that I was personally looking for reconciliation. This is somewhat different than the reconciliation that we think about when we think of something like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. In that case, you typically have people publicly confessing about how systemic racism caused them to do wrong to members of the community. They formally try to reconcile their misdeeds for amnesty and social progress. It is a bold act of seeking trust. In my experience, people weren't really attempting to reconcile; they didn't really care about my experience or my thoughts on race, racism, and my hometown.

So, this work really is personal. When I was cultivating my own research, I realized that doing historical research rooted in my personal experience was a way for me to reconcile my painful past with racism. I had been called "wetback" during my freshman year in high school. But I was also silent when I observed others using anti-Black racial slurs. At some point, I noticed that I was going through some transformations as a researcher and as an overall adult. Specifically, I was trying to figure out how to make antiracism part of my identity and stance without compromising the integrity of the work. In my case, I started seeing how drawing on my emotions and experience could actually be really vital towards my projects.

Chris: You have definitely devoted a lot of intellectual and emotional energy into making your work accessible to multiple audiences—with your production of *Man on Fire*, the diss, and your current book project. I want to talk a little bit about your methods. What has antiracist filmmaking taught you about antiracist research?

James: That's a really great question! How you interact with your film participants is really important to both of these processes. I focus on Grand Saline because part of my antiracist research agenda is to create a space for White people, especially White people in and around my hometown, to be reflexive about their community.

I didn't want to just claim, "Grand Saline is the most racist town in all of America. But that's just how it is. We can't do anything. Whatever. We don't have to think about it." With *Man on Fire*, we really tried to focus on not showing these very explicit forms of bigotry. If you interview someone for an hour and a half, not everyone is going to say something bigoted, but someone can take a ten-second interview about culturally sensitive topics and twist it in a way that makes you look bad.

Now, I don't deny that these people said things that were very bigoted. But my goal was to highlight my specific experiences with race. I wanted to showcase how implicit racism can be. We wanted to hold up a mirror to Grand Saline to say, "Look, you're not unique in your racism. There's racism like this all across the country. But we're trying to invite this space in for you to be able to reflect on your actions and think about other ways we can move forward with that." And honestly, it hasn't had a huge impact. Occasionally, I've had people from my community reach out to me and say, "Hey, you know, I never really thought about these issues before. But talking with you after watching the film, you know, I have questions and I want to think about it," etc. But I haven't seen a monumental shift.

As a researcher thinking about research practices, I constantly think about how anti-racism might help us become more self-reflexive in our own processes of trying to commit to ending these injustices. I'm always battling with this issue, as I discuss throughout my chapter, as well as the issue of essentialism. I frequently contemplate the risks of antiracist research. Like—how does the focus on race and racism inadvertently oversimplify or essentialize Grand Saline?

I've been asked these kinds of questions. "Are you labeling this town as racist? Are you just following the stereotype of the South being super racist?" And I get that. But ultimately, that's not what we're trying to do. We're trying to be honest about what we see. This ethic should guide the goal of any researcher.

But back to the problem of representation. . . .

Grand Saline is hardly unique for its racism. A whole lot of other communities exist like this, where we need to have these conversations. Don't get me wrong, my research doesn't simply reduce everyone in this community as die-hard KKK racists. However, I'm aware that the work risks this misinterpretation. In writing my own autoethnography, I really tried to work through these major issues throughout this chapter.

Alex: Thanks, James! Can we talk more about the problem of race and representation?

In your chapter, you claim that, “The problem with racial literacy narratives (as with any narrative) is that they only focus on specific moments of time in which something racialized or racist takes place, which means that we might look back at the culture being described in these stories and might essentialize a people and a place as uniquely bigoted because of that narrative, or because of *the* narrative.”

I found myself going over that quote and thinking about your ethical struggle with naming racism. Isn't the nature of systemic racism the fact that it is ubiquitous? Like, it is part of our geographies. It is a characteristic of its scene and apparatuses, written into the law and our social codes of conduct. In that sense, why is it a problem to name a place as racist or read race into experience? After all, aren't the practices of racism and the cultures of white supremacy diverse and disproportionate in their scope and scale of damage?

James: You're absolutely right, Alex. That's a really important question!

I think it's all about framing. Ultimately, I'm trying to think about the degree of my impact on public and local perceptions of Grand Saline, as well as the potential for people to be antiracist in that space. Therefore, I am very interested in the audience's reception of my work. In the context of this chapter and our book, overall, I know that the people who will read this are likely to be part of my professional discourse communities. On one hand, I hope this text is something that will be utilized by experienced researchers and graduate students alike. But on the other hand, I would also love for people from my hometown to potentially be an audience for my work and I am constantly thinking about how I need to situate them, given that Grand Saline is an object of critique because it *does* have a problem with racism. However, I don't want to give the impression that Grand Saline is somehow a uniquely racist place where nothing can change and that its residents are all these terrible human beings. Plus, when you say the words race or racism, a lot of people shut down. That's my ethical dilemma: how do I label someone or somewhere as racist?

Because it's true. . . . Grand Saline is a scene where racism is overt enough to directly observe it—and frequently—so it's easy to label the entire town as racist. How do I describe it that way while also finding ways for me to invite in the community to participate in the conversation? How can I be invitational while also telling those people that I'm inviting to a discussion that they have a problem? I don't have a great idea how to do that.

Alex: Well, racism maps on to multiple oppressive systems. If we understand racism as a structural problem, and we say that Grand Saline is a town that exemplifies the systemic nature of racism (e.g., casual use of racist terms in everyday conversation, lack of Black people in the town, etc.), how is the town

being essentialized? The value of your work is that you give your audience(s) an opportunity to examine provocative, but typical, racial stories to decide whether, “Yes, we have a problem,” or “No, we don’t have a problem. That’s just who we are.” This seems like the invitation you offer. Should you feel that the ethical dilemma is on you or the people from the town who refuse to see or engage the issues of race and racism?

James: Hmm . . . I’m not sure. Could you elaborate on what you mean?

Alex: For example, did people from Grand Saline respond to Moore’s death as a problem? Did some people say, “Man, we need to really talk about what happened here, as a community,” or was the reaction simply, “That man’s crazy. We are just who we are.”?

I’m curious because I’m from (Northeast) Texas, as well. Similar to your relationship to Grand Saline, I understand Texarkana as a “racist” town. My racial literacy about this place is informed by the fact that Northeast Texas is notorious for its history of lynchings (such as that of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas—1893, which was reportedly attended by thousands of people who traveled long distances to see him be murdered). And those lynchings solidified a racially segregated social structure that continues to permeate that location. Given this painful history, I’m wondering about the viability of invitation and forgiveness.

We must concede that we know for a fact that racism causes real violence and trauma, which can literally shape generation after generation of race relations. Unfortunately, we can’t transform people’s racial attitudes and behavior unless we better understand how racism plays out in towns like Grand Saline, whose size and homogeneity might make it easy to overlook.

James: Yeah, for sure. I understand that point. Basically, I never wanted to create a project that only further alienates me from my hometown, or alienates the town itself. I fear others not seeing my work as helpful. Therefore, I’m interested in using it to create a space to invite these residents in for a conversation. It’s really important to me. Not because I am defending my community or giving them an easy way out of being accountable for its racism. I’m far more concerned with *actual* change. Can my small hometown of 3,000 people host real conversations about race, especially when communities with people of color are within 20 miles? What will it take to actually move forward and not hold on to resentment?

I’m wondering about White audiences who might read this book and/or watch my film and choose to focus solely on how I benefited from racism. Maybe they’ll say,

“When you were in town you seemed to enjoy yourself.”

“You were Homecoming King.”

“You’re just being a race-baiter.”

So I'm always thinking about my skeptical audiences and ways that I can still reach out to them. Perhaps that's the rhetorical problem with essentialism. I don't necessarily think a scholarly (White) audience would think, "Hey, you're essentializing rural America, or Grand Saline, Texas." However, even within this audience—and certainly a more public and local White audience—my work could be challenging to someone who advocates that a "colorblind" perspective is the most appropriate way to solve negative race relations. I want them to read my work and be able to reflect critically enough to reach the point where they conclude, "Hey, maybe James isn't just attacking us and saying we're the worst, most evil people of all time. He's coming at this with a certain nuance. Maybe I need to re-examine my racial experiences here." I think crafting narratives using autoethnography might help researchers bring in that nuance. In my case, it enabled me to simultaneously take responsibility and draw attention to the pervasiveness of racism.

Alex: I definitely understand your concern about y/our audience's racial and economic and cultural backgrounds, James. However, I still don't know how I feel about the way that we ought to talk about White participation in antiracism.

Like you, I wholeheartedly believe that we need as many spaces as possible to talk about our racial literacies. But I still haven't quite figured out your particular vision for antiracist methodology. Why do you care so much about resistant audiences when their racism, literally, may inhibit them from listening to you? Clearly, if they are reading your work, they know that they will be engaging the racial issues. You are from Grand Saline, which gives you some credibility. I mean, are there any nice and neat ways to introduce such an ugly problem as racism? Doesn't silence negatively affect the quality of life of a place where folks don't want to do different cuz, "It's just the way it is." Unfortunately, that's how small towns end up in generational cycles of poverty, regardless of race. I hope we might address this issue towards the end of our dialogue.

Iris: James, your experience in Grand Saline reminds me of my own high school experience in Clovis, California, which is a very traditional institution in a predominantly White city. Therefore, your chapter really hits home with me.

Can you talk a little bit more about autoethnography as an antiracist method? I'd like to know more about how being an embodied narrator affects how we imagine building and creating representations of the epistemology of marginalized populations. Specifically, you introduce the concept of racial literacy. What does this literacy do for you? Why is it necessary for humanities research about race and racism?

James: Sure, that's such a great question. Growing up and playing sports, my nicknames were "wetback" and "beaner." Those were acceptable things to call someone and the White people knew that they could call me that and there would be no action from me. I wouldn't get upset or get angry, whereas I can imagine that

some other Latinx people might not go for that. Or maybe they would if they were in the same position I was, I'm not sure. I often reflect about why these memories are so painful and why those emotions make this research so important to me. I don't think my experience was unique. I'm a biracial Latinx person—part White, part Brown—who doesn't speak Spanish. Surely, there have to be hundreds, if not thousands, of Brown people who've had similar experiences: were called similar nicknames and didn't resist racism because they were just trying to fit in, like me.

We knew that in some way, whiteness held cultural capital; it means being “normal” right? I definitely tried to be a “very white” Brown person so I wouldn't be singled out even more. If you could hang out with all the popular White people and sit at their all-White table (literally), and be friends with all these people, you could get better treatment. Maybe you weren't White, but you were better than the Latinx people who sat at the same table together and all fluently spoke Spanish with each other. It is shameful to remember that at one point, I thought that avoiding them and being surrounded by White people meant that I was “better than them.” That situation is terrible and what does it mean that millions of non-White people have that experience every single day?

This autoethnography, and the process of acquiring racial literacy, might be viable ways that we can intervene. Even though it's about me, as is the essence of autoethnography, I hope other people read this, Iris, and realize that their experiences aren't so dissimilar. Maybe this recognition will spark conversation and enable us to change communities like Grand Saline. In fact, focused and sustained discussion about race in high school is really vital to social change. In this space, we need to think about how people talk to each other in locker rooms, cafeterias, classrooms, etc.

When I left high school, I had so much racial, racist baggage, especially in terms of anti-Black attitudes. I was taught to be afraid of Black people, that they were dangerous and their culture was deficient compared to nearly all other racial/ethnic groups. For example, rap music was bad, as were their physical features. I was surrounded by negative messaging about the way Black people dressed, did their hair, etc., etc. Their very existence was, in essence, inferior to White people. I had to spend over a decade of my life unlearning that. It's very difficult to consciously work through various processes of unlearning these biases that you're taught throughout your entire existence. I hope my chapter teaches the audience some ways for people to unlearn their racism and/or address their own traumatic experiences with racism.

Iris: Thanks, James! I appreciate how you describe that racial literacy is not necessarily about the individual researcher, but about *collective* experiences.

In my own experience, I learned about race by talking about race through my personal embodied relationship to brownness and blackness. I think your

story stands out to me because of how you emphasize race and epistemology. This perspective is interesting because it's a non-traditional view. It challenges the notion of race as a predetermined biological phenomenon. There are specific moments in your chapter that stood out to me, like when you discuss distancing yourself from other Brown people. In academia, we're not necessarily immune from racism, as initiators and recipients—Let's be honest!

Could you talk a little bit more about what that past experience means to you now as a Latinx scholar in higher education where we are very underrepresented?

James: Sure! It's a great question. I actually do have an experience that I don't talk about in the chapter, but I share often.

I was at a concert in Dallas, which is about an hour and a half east or west of Grand Saline, during undergrad. I was leaving the concert, walking down the street by myself. Suddenly, I see two young Black men, around my age or slightly younger, walking down the same side of the street. My automatic reaction was, "I have to cross the street. I'm afraid, I have to cross the street."

I quickly crossed the street and kept going.

I can't shake that memory. On one hand, I was walking down a street in Dallas at night. Why shouldn't I have been afraid of anyone, regardless of color? Years later, I am more willing to admit that race played a role in my decision-making. It pains me that my initial thought was, "Well, you *have* to cross the street. These types of people might cause trouble." Even though I now clearly identify as someone committed to antiracism, I know that unlearning is a continuous process. If that same scenario happened right now, there would probably still be that moment when I might still think, "Hey, maybe I should cross the street. . . ." However, I would draw this conclusion after I ask myself, "Am I being racist? Don't do that." In these tense contexts, I have to be reflexive. I don't know if that process ever ends, but I feel like this is part of the hard work of antiracism. One of the most important things that you can do is fully engage conflicting thoughts and feelings and recognize that you're working through something serious. Antiracism is a goal, but I also define it as a process. This habit of mind, in some ways, reflects the kind of critical thinking any researcher should be doing. What kinds of (previously held) biases might show up in our own work? Do I cite mostly (White) male scholars as a general tendency in my citation practices? When I'm exposed to unfamiliar cultural issues, do I ask, "What is it that I'm missing? Am I integrating everything properly? What would enable me to more comprehensively think about these questions?"

Iris: These are good questions because they really showcase how antiracism as a methodology influences inquiry and epistemological of race. I like the way you describe the challenges of unlearning racism. It took you at least a decade to realize that racist behaviors are not fixed, or even normal (even though they

can be normative). As you described, people of color at your high school experience seemed to react to racism in somewhat of an anaesthetized manner. At some point, there had to be at least one instance when you felt like you needed to critically distance yourself from other POC. Likewise, there must have been a moment when you realized that you too were racially coded. Tracing those experiences enabled you to discover something that you needed to know.

Alex: Can we switch back to the issue of how we communicate about race and theorize the concept of reconciliation?

How do discourses of civility reinforce white supremacy? Politeness can be weaponized to inhibit our ability to really address the structural nature of racism. Naming it as a problem may not be considered “nice,” which can cause conflict for many people even if they feel morally obligated to antiracism.

A lot of folks are from towns where racist social practices influence how you define your identity. On one hand, it’s how you’ve learned to connect with people there and wield enough power to be treated “like everyone else.” On the other hand, that kind of behavior ends up still being very problematic when we consider leaving that place to pursue social mobility.

As you discuss inviting people to join you for conversations about race, I think there’s an opportunity to be more critical about how normal it is to disrespect and objectify people in the US. We make fun of people for being fat, gay, disabled, feminine, etc. Bullying is a central feature of American society. From an early age, we learn to compete and connect that way. Perhaps identifying how we participate in such social dynamics, in general, might lower people’s barriers a bit when having conversations about race.

James: I wrote a blog post on Grand Saline about four years ago that relates to a topic you brought up earlier. It’s entitled “The Historical Truth of Lynching and Racism in Grand Saline.” I’ve had well over 30,000 hits on that blog. It comes up anytime someone searches about “Grand Saline” and racism. When I was making *Man on Fire*, a person actually said flippantly, “Well, you know that everyone in our town is reading your Facebook right now.” I was like, “Good! They’re seeing my work!” I’m glad people are watching, reading, and listening to me to open up the potential for having these complex conversations. Discussion is progress, but I’m trying to figure out additional ways to organize people (especially from Grand Saline) to take antiracist action.

Alex: That’s really cool! Excellent, James. Thank you! So, you have anything else to add before we conclude our dialogue?

James: No, I think we addressed mostly everything. I’m going to continue to probe the idea (and practice) of reconciliation. I invite the audience to build on this work as we shift from merely acknowledging racism exists to trying to change it.