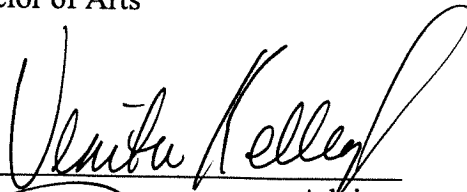# How Can I Be Down?:
## An Ethnographic Account of My Experience as a White Member of the Black Student Government at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1996 - 1998
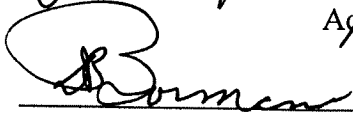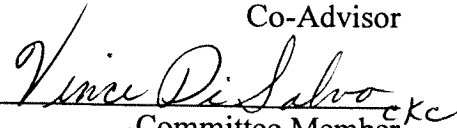
by

Alyson Jean Goodall

Presented to the Department of Communication Studies
and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the
University of Nebraska-Lincoln in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
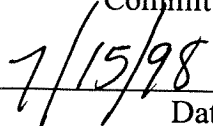with highest distinction.

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Committee Member

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How Can I Be Down?: An Ethnographic Account of My Experience as a
White Member of the Black Student Government at the
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1996 - 1998

**Introduction**

**Purpose and Significance of Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine, from an intercultural communication

perspective, my personal experience as a White woman in the Black Student Government on

the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This study is significant due to the

uniqueness of the situation and the success of the association. Most research on cross-cultural

encounters takes an international focus, and does not investigate such interaction within the

United States. My experience is also important as an example of "real world" intercultural

interaction in our increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society that proclaims to value

such diversity.

**Background Information**

When I reflect upon my personal background, I realize that I was exposed to many

experiences that indirectly prepared me for my involvement as a White woman in the Black

Student Government. I may not have understood the significance at the time, but it is clear to

me now that such experiences had a major impact on the development and strength of my

character. My parents played a profound part in shaping me via the neighborhood, church,

and schools in which they chose to raise me. My church congregation, though predominately

White, was racially mixed. I attended Sunday School, sang in choirs, acted in church plays,

participated in youth group activities, and worshiped with Blacks. My parents refused to

participate in the "White flight" phenomenon that had Whites leaving the "inner city" and moving further into suburban west Omaha. Rather, our family remained in the Benson area, on the near north side of town. I do not recall any of the kids in my immediate neighborhood being Black (one family on my block was Mexican American). However, the neighborhood schools I attended were racially mixed. My junior and senior high schools, though majority-White, were not predominately so. I interacted with Blacks through classes, cheerleading, National Honor Society, swing choir, and a variety of other school-related activities. My parents were open to all of my friends, regardless of race. They accepted the Black friends and boyfriends I brought home to dinner without any questions, hesitancy, or sign of disapproval.

I think that the open, unbigoted environment with which my parents provided me made race a non-issue for me. I always knew Black people, in several different aspects of my life, so they never seemed foreign or frightening to me. If anything, I probably did not give enough credit to the vastly different histories, cultures, and socioeconomic positions of Whites and Blacks.

I distinctly remember the first time that I woke up and realized that race mattered. During my sophomore year of high school there was a school-wide assembly in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The program featured a performer who delivered speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in character. This dramatic portrayal, taken out of context, evoked hostility and defensiveness on the part of many students. As my high school quickly divided along racial lines, those of us who thought the tension was misguided made light of the situation.

The day after the assembly, a friend and I were joking between class periods that we could no longer be friends since I was White and she was Black. We were using sarcasm to poke fun at what we thought was an absurd situation. As I encountered another friend in the hallway, I continued my sarcastic tone in telling him that I could not believe that he was sharing a locker with someone who was Black. My friend, who was White, found humor in my comment and made similar sarcastic remarks. Unfortunately, his locker partner, who was Black, was not amused, and the two got into a physical confrontation over what I thought was a harmless joke. After a visit with a school administrator to explain the events leading to the fight, I became more sensitive to the issue of race and the baggage it carries. For the first time, I was stung with the accusation of being a racist bigot, and I hated the feeling.

Prior to attending college, I had not met any openly racist people. During my very first week in Lincoln, I met a White man who lived on my residence hall floor. We had mutual friends, so we started dining together in the cafeteria and occasionally hanging out together. During that first week, he advised me, completely out of the blue, that he would lose all respect for me if he ever learned that I was dating a Black man. I was shocked. I could not believe what I had heard. Having lost respect for *him*, I limited our association. It was also not uncommon for me to encounter Whites telling racist jokes at parties. In these instances, I would explain that I did not find humor in tasteless, bigoted jokes, and did not care to hear them. As a reaction to such people and situations encountered upon entry into my Freshman year of college at UNL, I developed a conscious and passionate commitment to the elimination of hatred, racism, and bigotry.

I was able to channel this passion into a course of study that helped me approach racial

issues in a much different light by providing me with multiple perspectives and theoretical foundation, as well as facts and figures and their interpretations and applications. My first semester at UNL, fall of 1994, I took a Sociology Honors Seminar entitled Race, Class, and Gender. In it I learned a great deal about social stratification, privilege, racism, classism, and sexism. This course sparked my interest and paved the way for similar course work in a variety of departments with a particular focus on race. I took courses such as: Interracial Communication, History of Africa, Nationality and Race Relations, Social Psychological Consequences of Inequality, African American Literature, and Black Women and Communication. Eventually I earned a Black Studies minor, although I did not begin taking such courses with that goal in mind. I also completed courses falling outside of the discipline of Black Studies that were taught by Black professors and graduate students.

I was fortunate to have developed mentor relationships with the two Black female faculty members in my department who provided invaluable insight, wisdom, guidance, and instruction in both my personal life and academic career. These professors also helped me to build a network of resources and acquaintances among Black students, staff, and faculty.

In some of my classes, especially those offered through the Communication Studies department, I had the opportunity to engage in candid discussions with Black students. I learned of people's experiences with discrimination, views on interracial relationships, ways of being brought up, and the like. As I expressed my interest and understanding of people, and they came to understand what I was all about, I was often noted for my empathy. I was often described by my Black classmates as being "straight" or "down," which basically meant that they were pretty comfortable with me. One woman, Olivia, with whom I had become quite

well acquainted through class, commented, "Was your grandmama Black, because you understand; you *know*." I think that one of the reasons why I came across as genuine to Blacks was that I was not afraid to inquire about things with which I had little experience or of which I knew no history. My questions were never framed as probing, nor were they nosy or self-serving. I never asked one person to speak as the voice of Black America. I would ask those people with whom I felt I had established an appropriate relationship about cultural traits and phenomena. This inquisitiveness aided me in gaining a better understanding of Black culture and history, instead of merely relying on stereotypes or fabrications.

Ultimately, this background served as preparation for my sojourn into Black culture. My upbringing, coursework, and intercultural encounters helped me to develop a consciousness and competence that guided my entry into the Black Student Government at UNL. This account of preparatory events and influences serves as a personal backdrop from which to view this study. The following literature review provides a theoretical framework.

## Limitations

This study is based on my experience alone. Therefore, the results are not generalizable to other sojourners or different cultures. As an ethnographer, I was the instrument of data collection, so the account is subject to interpretation bias and memory failure. However, this type of study is rich in description and attempts to provide an authentic understanding of the case at hand. The environment was natural, and I was a true participant rather than a mere observer. These factors lead to genuine understanding of phenomena.

## Review of Literature

Intercultural communication competence, cross-cultural adaptation, and White identity are concepts of particular relevance to my study. Sptizberg (1994) explains that intercultural communication competence is marked by an impression of appropriateness and effectiveness in a given context and relationship. "Appropriateness means that the valued rules, norms, and expectancies of the relationship are not violated significantly. Effectiveness is the accomplishment of valued goals or rewards relative to costs and alternatives" (Spitzberg, 1994, p. 347). Spitzberg combines theory with practical advice in a series of propositions to guide communication behavior at the individual, episodic, and relational levels of intercultural interaction. Of particular interest to my study are the individual system, which involves characteristics possessed by an individual that lead to communication competence, and the relational system, which involves components that facilitate competence "across the entire span of relationships" (Spitzberg, 1994, p. 350). Spitzberg's individual system propositions assert that communicative competence increases as does communicator motivation, communicative knowledge, and communicator skill. His relational system propositions indicate that relational competence increases along with mutual fulfillment of autonomy and intimacy needs, mutual attraction, mutual trust, access to social support, and relational network integration.

Gudykunst (1991) expands on Spitzberg's notion of motivation, knowledge, and skills as the components of communication competence. He highlights the critical need of humans to avoid or diffuse anxiety when interacting with strangers as a motivating factor for intercultural communication. He notes that knowledge of the other group or culture is

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essential to appropriate and effective (competent) intercultural communication. Gudykunst lists these skills as necessary for intercultural communication competence: (a) being mindful of the process and outcomes of communication; (b) developing high tolerance for ambiguity in order to seek objective information about others; (c) displaying empathy; (d) demonstrating behavioral flexibility; and (e) reducing uncertainty. Empathy and behavioral flexibility are necessary to the development of the ability to reduce uncertainty. Being mindful of communication and developing tolerance for ambiguity are directly related to the motivating need of reducing anxiety.

Pennington (1985) focuses on the knowledge component of intercultural communication. ". . . The beginning of intercultural communication is cultural understanding – of culture in general, of one's own culture in particular, and of another's culture" (Pennington, 1985, p. 31). She lists the following significant cultural components that need to be understood from a historical perspective in order to understand a culture's present state: (a) world-view, cosmology, and ontology; (b) language and symbol system; (c) schemas; (d) beliefs, attitudes, and values; (e) temporality; (f) space and proxemics; (g) religion, myth, and expressive forms; (h) social relationships and communication networks; and (i) interpolation patterns. A cultural-historical understanding of these components will help explain what occurs when cultures intersect in intercultural communication.

Kochman (1981) approaches intercultural communication specifically in terms of the interaction between Blacks and Whites. His participant-observation study of Black language and culture reveals differences in communicative practices of Blacks and Whites that often lead to conflict and misunderstanding between the groups. Based on Whites' reactions to

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Blacks and vice versa, Kochman details the following areas of difference: (a) style and expressiveness; (b) public presentations; (c) inquisitiveness; (d) accusations and allegations; (e) male-female interaction; (f) boasting and bragging; (g) aggressive behavior; and (h) classroom modalities. For example, Black speakers tend to interpret silence on the part of White listeners as a sign that they are uninterested or not paying attention. Conversely, White speakers often consider responses of Black listeners uttered in call-and-response fashion while Whites are speaking to be interruptions. Kochman considers such differences cultural reasons for communication difficulty.

Many scholars (e.g., Brislin, 1981; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Yoshikawa, 1988; Kim, 1994; Klopf, 1995) address intercultural communication as it advances cross-cultural adaptation or acculturation to a new culture. Such discussions tend to focus on adaptation that occurs internationally as strangers such as students, tourists, sojourners, and workers travel to foreign countries. However, I find these theories of cross-cultural or intercultural adaptation to be applicable in intercultural situations within the United States. One does not have to travel to a foreign country in order to interact with or become immersed in another culture. Many of the premises of these theories were relevant to my sojourn which did not involve an international journey.

According to Kim (1994) the communication process is the main facilitator of cross-cultural adaptation. She examines the personal communication of the stranger (as opposed to a native) in a host culture in terms of host communication competence, "the overall capacity of a stranger to decode and encode information in accordance with host cultural practices of communication" (pp. 394-395). Host communication competence is comprised of cognitive,

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affective, and operational competence. Cognitive competence involves knowledge of host culture and language. Affective competence includes the stranger's attitudes toward self and toward the host culture, ability to understand and empathize with the host, and willingness and determination to gain cultural and linguistic knowledge of the host culture. Operational competence refers to the stranger's outward expression of both cognitive and affective competencies. This personal communication capacity of the stranger is practiced and honed in social (interpersonal and mass) communication activities with natives of the host culture.

Conditions of the environment and characteristics of the stranger also influence the adaptation process. Environmental conditions include receptivity and conformity pressure on the part of the host, and the stranger's relative ethnic group strength. Stranger characteristics that determine predisposition to adaptation include preparedness, ethnicity, and personality. Personality traits of particular relevance are openness and strength.

Given Kim's (1994) mention of ethnicity as a characteristic of predisposition to adaptation and Pennington's (1985) indication that knowledge of one's own culture is key to intercultural communication, a discussion of white identity is warranted. In my role as the (White) stranger interacting in a (Black) host culture, it is my race, not my ethnicity, that is salient. Martin (1997) defines race in terms of categories constructed of social meanings that are interpreted through and influence communication. She notes that White identity is dominant or normative. Whites do not usually think about being White because of the power associated with being so. Whiteness is considered the norm or standard in American society and thus becomes invisible to those in this racial category. Martin identifies three dimensions of White identity that are often hard to recognize. These dimensions are linked by power.

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Whiteness is: (a) a location of structural advantage; (b) a standpoint from which Whites view themselves, others, and society; and (c) a set of cultural practices, including symbols, labels, and norms.

McIntosh (1988) examines White privilege as an important but usually unrecognized or denied aspect of Whiteness. She lists forty-six of the daily effects and special conditions she experiences as a result of the privilege of her skin-color. These privileges include:

(a) I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented (p. 73); (b) I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group (p. 74); (c) I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race (p. 74); and (d) I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do (p. 75).

McIntosh asserts that the obliviousness of Whites to their unearned privilege helps maintain the current oppressive power structure that purportedly exists based on meritocracy. White identity, along with intercultural communication competence and cross-cultural adaptation, constitute the key communication themes that will guide the analysis of my experience as a White sojourner in the culture of Black Student Government at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

**Methodology**

My research is qualitative in nature, a label that Van Maanen (1983) deems imprecise. "Qualitative methods. . . . is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen, 1983, p. 9). Description is at the heart of data collection in a qualitative study. Lindlof (1995) describes qualitative study as "personal, involved inquiry" (p. 5). This description is highly appropriate to my study which arose out of personal involvement. Denzin (1997) writes, "The qualitative researcher reproduces experiences that embody cultural meanings and cultural understandings that operate in the 'real' world" (pp. 32-33). My research is of "real world" intercultural interaction.

Specifically, my study is an ethnography. Van Maanen (1988) defines ethnography as "written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" (p. 1). More specifically, my paper takes the form of ethnography that Van Maanen (1988) calls an impressionist tale.

> Such tales comprise a series of remembered events in the field in which the author was usually a participant. . . . What makes the story worth telling is its presumably out of the ordinary or unique character. Impressionist tales are not about what usually happens but about what rarely happens. . . . They reconstruct in dramatic form those periods the author regards as especially notable and hence reportable. Tales often initiate an analysis of the nature of cultural understanding and the fieldworker's role as a student. (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 102)

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In my impressionist tale, I am the primary source as participant-observer.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) define participant observation as "a form of inquiry in which the inquirer – the observer – is playing *two* roles. First of all, of course, he [or she] is an observer. . . . But he [or she] is also a genuine participant; that is, he [or she] is a member of the group, and he [or she] has a stake in the group's activity and the outcomes of that activity" (pp. 189-190). In my particular case of participant observation, however, the role priorities are reversed. I was, and continue to be, a participant *first*. My interest lies in the group, and in being a part of the group. My intent was never to exploit or scrutinize the group for research purposes.

Adler & Adler (1987) break down the participant-observer into three roles: peripheral-, active-, and complete-member-researchers. I conducted my study as a complete-member-researcher. "Complete-member-researchers study their topics from the perspective of full members by either selecting groups to study in which they have prior membership or by converting to membership in these groups" (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 35). I did not associate myself with the group as a form of fieldwork, nor did I initially intend to analyze the association in a formal paper. It was not until well into my involvement within the Afrikan People's Union that I realized the significance of my position and decided to attempt to make sense of the experience as the topic of my honors thesis. What follows is that attempt – a personal narrative and accompanying analysis of my involvement as a White member of the Black Student Government at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

**Narrative and Analysis**

**Gospel Choir**

Spring 1996

My involvement in the Afrikan People's Union (APU) began with an invitation to sing. One evening early in the second semester of my sophomore year (spring 1996), I was about to leave a meeting when I encountered my friend Terrence. He was waiting to use the room my organization was occupying in the Culture Center. I asked him what he was doing there and he informed me that the APU Gospel Choir would be practicing there soon. I expressed an interest in gospel music and he invited me to sing with the choir that evening. I accepted the invitation.

Since I did not know anyone else in the choir, I was a little nervous. Terrence was a tenor and I was a soprano, so we sat in different sections of the choir. This separation threatened my sense of security in what was basically a foreign situation to me. I felt that I had to convince myself and the others that I belonged there without Terrence by my side to vouch for me. Prior to the practice, my interaction with the choir members was very limited. I engaged in some small talk with the other women in the soprano section, but not much. As I practiced with the choir I discovered that I really enjoyed gospel singing. After rehearsal, several people approached me to make introductions and welcome me, which left me with a positive feeling about my participation that evening. It seemed that once we sang together, the group in general opened up to me more. Unfortunately, a schedule conflict prevented me from attending any more choir practices that year.

The following fall semester, I had a class with a woman whom I recognized from the gospel choir. I introduced myself to her and asked if the choir would be meeting because I hoped to sing with them again. My classmate turned out to be Vanessa, the president of APU for the 1996-97 academic year. She explained that the choir had not started practicing yet, but promised to keep me informed. A few weeks later she wrote me a note in class detailing the time and location of a choir practice to be held that evening. I specifically remember that she concluded the invitation with the words "please come." Although I would not have a personal escort to this rehearsal as I had had in Terrence, I felt that Vanessa's invitation granted me permission and gave me courage to attend on my own.

The choir practice was to follow an APU meeting, so when I arrived I encountered not only the choir, but the entire membership of the Afrikan People's Union. As the only White person there, I was a "stranger in a strange land" and I immediately searched the room for familiar faces that could give me refuge. The mention of race in terms of color is justified because skin-color differences receive a lot of attention and have great significance placed on them in American society. Wills (1997) explains, "We are visually oriented animals, and the color of a stranger's skin, if different from our own, is often the characteristic we notice first" (p. 12).

I thought that standing next to or having a conversation with someone I was acquainted with would somehow validate my presence there. Some of the choir members greeted me and remarked that they remembered me from the one time I sang with them the year before. Their acknowledgment of me helped me to feel a little less out of place. We did

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not do any singing that evening because the choir director was unable to attend the practice. Instead Aisha, who was acting as the director's assistant, collected our phone numbers for a choir roster and asked us to return the following week.

The next week, about an hour before the rehearsal was scheduled to begin, I received a telephone call from a man who said he was calling on behalf of Aisha, the choir assistant. He told me that it was possible that there would be no choir practice that night because the director might not be able to attend. I asked him if I should go to the rehearsal site in order to find out for sure or wait for more details. He advised me to wait until he called back after he knew for certain whether or not practice would be held. I waited, but he did not phone a second time. I grew suspicious as the caller never identified himself. I wondered if perhaps the call was someone's way of telling me that I was not welcome in the choir. It would have been easy to exclude me from participating because all of the other choir members were already assembled at APU while I joined them later. The following day, I had a class with Alexis, one of the choir members. I asked her if there was a practice the night before. There was not. Rehearsal really had been canceled. The mystery caller's failure to get back to me was innocent. I experienced mixed feelings upon hearing this news. I was relieved that my suspicion was not confirmed, but I also felt terrible for entertaining such a paranoid thought.

After a slow start, the choir rehearsed regularly throughout the semester. I never missed a practice or a performance. I loved singing with the gospel choir. The choir director and all of the members welcomed me completely. I experienced a spiritual connection and commonality within the group that was truly uplifting.

**Joining APU**

Spring 1997

The paramount performance for which the choir had been preparing was the Gospel

Extravaganza at the Big VIII Conference on Black Student Government. (The Big VIII

Conference has since incorporated four Texas schools and become the Big XII Conference.)

The annual Conference was to be hosted by Iowa State University in the spring of 1997. At

the beginning of the semester, I was informed that the University donated the expense of a

chartered bus for the trip to Iowa, and that anyone intending to ride the bus with APU was

required to attend two APU meetings. Although I had been rehearsing weekly with APU's

Gospel Choir throughout the previous semester, I had never attended a business meeting.

Therefore, I went to my first two APU meetings in January of 1997 out of necessity.

I approached the first meeting similarly to how I had approached my first choir

rehearsal. I encountered several familiar faces due to my involvement with the choir, but

those who were most receptive to my attendance were members of the APU Executive Board.

Unfortunately, the executive officers sat at a head table separate from the members of the

general assembly, so I was unable to sit near them, protected by the umbrella of their

welcome. As members filtered in to the basement meeting room at the Culture Center, it was

impossible for me to overlook the empty chairs on either side of me that remained unfilled

until there were no other available seats. I exchanged greetings with a few people and

engaged in idle conversation with even fewer. As the meeting progressed, I listened intently

but did not contribute. My biggest concern was that of being perceived as an intruder in this

group of students. I realized that APU represented a haven of sorts in which Black students

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could interact in a comfortable, affirming environment. I did not want to encroach at all upon the rejuvenating service APU provided for Black students seeking cultural commonality and solidarity. I thought it was possible that my presence, as a physical reminder of the oppressive predominantly White campus, might interfere with APU's optimum level of functioning.

The major agenda item attended to at the meeting was APU's annual Martin Luther King, Jr. banquet to be held the following weekend. The Gospel Choir would be performing at the event, so I inquired after the meeting about obtaining tickets for me and my parents. I was told by Vanessa, APU President, that my parents could purchase tickets at the door but I could attend for free by paying APU membership dues for the semester. The dues were cheaper than the ticket price. It had never occurred to me that I could or should be an actual member of APU. I recall questioning Vanessa in disbelief about her proposal, "Can I? Are you sure?" She assured me that I could join. She seemed to have no reservations, so I paid the treasurer and instantly became a dues-paying member of APU with voting privileges.

I never expected it to be so easy to become involved with APU. I knew that University policy prohibited student organizations from discriminating on the basis of race, but I did not think the membership option would be extended to me so readily. I had envisioned some serious discussion about and perhaps vocal opposition to me joining. Upon becoming a member, I decided that I should do everything I could to demonstrate my commitment to APU. It was important to me that I take the membership seriously, and that my fellow members recognize this dedication. I began by arriving early for the Martin Luther King, Jr. banquet in order to help with last-minute preparations. As I folded programs and placed napkins, I met some members with whom I had not yet interacted. I also met and conversed

with Erika, one of APU's advisers.

I honestly can not remember much detail about my first few APU meetings. I do recall that I made a point of introducing myself before and after meetings to members that I did not know. However, these introductions seldom elicited responses of anything more than people's names. At this time, it was quite obvious that my degree of acceptance within the group was very low. I knew it. I felt it. I was a member yet I was an outsider. The vacant seats next to me at most meetings impressed this status upon me, as did the absence of acknowledgment when I encountered members on campus. My involvement with APU was confined to the context of the weekly business meetings. While I was not overtly discouraged from attending the meetings, I was never invited to participate in any informal activities engaged in by the members outside of these meetings. Rarely did I interact with the group in a social setting, so getting to know people was a slow process. I wanted to be considered a friend and an ally, but it was difficult to move beyond the standing of acquaintance. The beginning of my involvement in APU, specifically the ease of entry, speaks to the receptivity of the host culture. APU readily allowed me to participate, perhaps based on my association with the Gospel Choir and my interaction with APU members in classes (preparedness). However, I would then have to demonstrate my competence in order to prove myself worthy of the privilege of participation, and advance to greater degrees of acceptance and ultimately acculturation.

**Getting to Know APU**

I determined that the best way for me to get to know the group better was first to afford them every opportunity to get to know me. I vowed never to miss a meeting unless

extreme extenuating circumstances prohibited me from attending. I also made a point of attending as many events, lectures, forums, and the like that APU sponsored or that were of particular interest to the African American population on campus. By doing so I hoped to become a friendly, familiar face as well as demonstrate my dedication to APU. I also hoped to distinguish myself from the few other White students who occasionally attended portions of APU meetings to plug University events or campaign for Student Government, but who left the meetings as soon as they could. They're leaving was an indication to APU members that they only came around when they needed something from APU, but had no real interest in the group. Another considerable benefit of this course of action was that I became educated about the experiences and concerns of Black students attending a predominately White university. For me, as a member of the Black Student Government representing the issues, needs, and concerns of UNL's Black student community, education of this sort was essential to the development of my intercultural communication competence.

A couple of the more enjoyable educational experiences were the Soul Food Dinner and Evening of Expression which were held during Black History Month. For the first time that I can recall, I was introduced to soul food. I enjoyed greens, black-eyed peas, red beans and rice, cornbread, peach cobbler, and the like so much that I helped myself to seconds. Although I could not personally relate to the tradition of having Sunday soul food dinners with extended family, I could at least understand the roots and essence of the experience. After the dinner was the Evening of Expression, an open stage event in which people were invited to showcase their poetry, music, or other art or talent. Although anyone was welcome to participate, most of the performers were African American since the occasion was billed as

a part of Black History Month. (Unfortunately, I have discovered that many White students do not consider multicultural issues and events to pertain to them.) I read an excerpt from a novel by Terry McMillan and a poem by Maya Angelou, the latter of which I dedicated to my fellow APU members as a way of saying thank-you for their acceptance of me. My readings evoked a standing ovation.

**Finding My Voice**

One pivotal session in which I participated was an open forum with the Chancellor and other administrators regarding a recent fraternity ritual that occurred in mid-January involving displaying a confederate flag and burning a cross. The forum was designed to solicit reactions to the incident as well as gauge people's perceptions of the racial climate on campus. At one point Dwayne, an APU member, mentioned the problem of White students not understanding the permanence and prevalence of racism. The Chancellor, taking offense to Dwayne's analysis, angrily accused him of making a racist categorical statement and defended himself as a non-racist. He began his defense by slamming his notebook down on the table and concluded it by abruptly leaving the forum. After this display, several of my fellow APU members and Erika, an advisor, urged me to publicly share my interpretation of what Dwayne had said. The nudges and intense whispers of "Alyson, say something" prodded me to raise my hand to obtain permission to speak. I told the forum participants that I agreed with Dwayne's assessment of the problem of racism on our campus. Further, I, as a White person, did not feel that the statement was directed toward or accusatory of me.

This situation is an example of what Kochman (1981) points out as a difference in Black and White communication practice regarding accusations and denials. Allegations such

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as "the problem on this campus is that Whites do not understand the permanence and prevalence of racism" are considered categorical by Whites, but general by Blacks. Whites tend to feel that such statements are all-inclusive, and thus feel accused by them. Blacks, however, do not intend such statements to be all-inclusive and instead apply a rule of "if the shoe fits, wear it," dictating that those who protest innocence or admit they feel accused are likely guilty of the accusation (p. 90). I was able to identify and side with APU on this matter by addressing Dwayne's allegation from a Black communication perspective.

This event was critical to my enlightenment regarding my role as a White member of the Black Student Government. When I spoke at the forum, I developed a public voice that would allow APU to be heard in a different way and by different ears. My newly found voice had credibility because it was grounded in empathy rather than simply sympathy. This voice would say:

> *You can't box us in. These are not merely minority issues or Black issues. The scope is much, much broader. Other people, majority group members even, are concerned and involved, so you'd better recognize!*

I believe that my unique position and perspective within APU made me a vehicle through which APU could advance its cause. Even if no one cared to listen to anything I had to say on behalf of the organization, I think my visibility had an impact. Surely the image of a White ally surrounded by and embracing the cause of her Black comrades sparked some thought (and perhaps action) in someone.

### Big VIII Conference

It seemed that my entrance into and beginning development within APU coincided

with eventful times for the organization. As well as dealing with the cross-burning, APU's membership was planning a trip to the annual Big VIII Conference on Black Student Government to be held at Iowa State University in late February. The Gospel Choir would be singing one evening during the Conference and I planned to perform. Again assuming that my race would be a prohibitive factor, I at first figured that I would go only for the performance. However, recalling my vow to be a participant in all APU-related activities, I began to consider the possibility of attending the entire Conference. I probed some of my Black friends for their thoughts on the matter and received thoughtful advice. I was encouraged to attend, but I was warned that it might be a difficult experience as some people might question what business I could possibly have at the Conference or oppose my being there. Vanessa said that she could not recall ever having seen a White person at any previous Conferences she had attended, but that it would be perfectly fine for me to go. One of my friends told me that I should be prepared to be made an example of because I would represent "the man" (the oppressor). He advised me not to take it personally. A couple of APU members provided assurances such as, "If anyone gives you any trouble, I got your back" (meaning that they would support and defend me). For further guidance, I contacted the public relations chair of the Conference via e-mail, explained my situation, and basically asked permission to attend. He responded that I certainly could be a Conference participant and stated that we (Americans) should have made progress enough that people are not concerned about skin color.

At this point, I came to the realization that until that moment I had never before had to worry about my race or skin color limiting me in any way. I saw my inherent White privilege

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more clearly because it was virtually null in this situation. For the first time, I, a majority group member, was in the minority. The major difference between my position within APU and that of American racial minorities, however, is that I occupied my station by choice. This element of choice is indicative of the prevalence of White privilege. Although it appeared that the shoe was on the other foot, I maintained the power to change the pair I wore at any time. I continued to walk in those shoes, however, even when they wore blisters on my feet.

Ignatiev (1997) suggests that White privilege can be dismantled by following such recommendations as, "Identify with the racially oppressed; violate the rules of whiteness in ways that can have social impact" (p. 613). In a way, my membership and activism in APU constituted violations of "rules of whiteness." I chose not to cash in on certain unearned privileges afforded to me by virtue of my race alone. Specifically, I refused to enjoy the following privileges as identified by McIntosh (1992):

(a) I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time (p. 73); (b) I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion (p. 74); (c) I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared (p. 74); and (d) I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race (p. 75).

This refusal to accept White privilege impacts both my avowed and ascribed White identity, which I will discuss later.

I decided to go to Big VIII. What better way to build my capacity to empathize with

non-majority students than to immerse myself, to an extent, in a micro-cultural experience? I braced myself for a cold, if not hostile, reception, but hoped that I would be welcomed on the basis of APU's acceptance of me as a member. I was fortunate to have developed a friendship through Gospel Choir with a woman named Alexis. She would be my roommate at the Conference. I knew that I could look to her for refuge in the event that I was deemed an outcast. I was prepared for the worst. The worst never came.

The Conference kicked off on a Thursday evening with a Def Comedy Jam. I was seated in the third row between my friends Alexis and Andre for this event. I knew there was a strong possibility that I would be singled out and made fun of by one or more of the comedians, and I decided that I would just laugh along and take the jokes in stride. The first comedian to perform, toward the beginning of his act, told a joke that began with the question, "Where are all the White people at?" Pointing to me emphatically, he answered, "There she is!" I raised my hand and waved to the audience as my fellow APU members yelled, "NU!," our school's call or chant for the Conference. I felt redeemed. APU had claimed me publically. Rather than showing any embarrassment for being with me, they reacted with a display of group pride. Nothing more was made of my presence during the Comedy Jam.

Andre shared with me after the performance that the person sitting on his other side had advised him to change seats because he might be ridiculed by the comedians for sitting with me. Andre told him that he was not worried about it and retained his seat. I also learned after the fact that several people were worried about what might happen to me during the Def Comedy Jam as some comedians could be quite brutal in their ridicule of people, and I was a

prime target due to the visibility of my Whiteness. I was fortunate that any jokes made about me or my Whiteness were few and mild.

Following the Comedy Jam was a mass choir rehearsal for all the schools participating in the Gospel Extravaganza. Most choir members left immediately after the practice, but several, including Alexis and I, remained to go over some difficult parts in the songs we had just learned. Alexis and I were the only people from APU's choir to stay late, and we were worried about finding the correct shuttle stop and making it back to our hotel. As we left the rehearsal, we found Sherell and Nakisha, two of our choir members, waiting for us in the hallway. I thanked them for waiting, and Nakisha replied, "We don't leave our people." Beyond the fact that they cared enough to wait for us, it was significant to me that I was included in "our people."

I noticed one White man at choir rehearsal and another during a workshop the next day. The three of us seemed to be the only registered Conference participants who were White. Although some other White people attended the various nationally and internationally acclaimed speakers, they did not participate in the entire Conference as did the three of us. One of the men introduced himself to me, but the other never spoke to me. I had negative feelings about interacting with White people at the Conference. For one thing, I felt no kinship toward them simply because they were White. I also did not feel, nor did I want to give the appearance, that I needed to surround myself with people who look like me in order to feel comfortable at the Conference. In addition, although I had no basis upon which to doubt them, I was suspicious of their motives for being there. I knew that I was genuine, but I could not be sure that they were. I believe that this concern with their genuineness arose out

of what I felt was a need to protect the group. I realize that it was probably unfair of me to reject them because it was likely that they were struggling with similar issues of acceptance. However, the Conference only spanned a weekend, and I felt that it was important to spend that time with Black people. This issue of how I should react or relate to the White men never manifested itself, as I seldom encountered them.

I have discerned three probable reasons behind this reaction to the presence of other Whites at the Conference. The less noble of the two reasons is that I felt that what I was doing was unique. I wanted to own the experience, as I had personally invested a great deal of time, energy, and emotion in it. Discovering that other Whites occupied similar roles as I did within Black Student Government stole my thunder. The second reason is that Whites are thought to value individualism, while Blacks embrace collectivism. Whites do not usually think of themselves and fellow Whites as a collective. I may have been acting on the White cultural trait of individualism by wanting to set myself apart from these other Whites. The third reason is a demonstration of adaptation or acculturation on my part. I reacted to the presence of other Whites with suspicion and caution, as likely did my fellow APU members. I had adopted some of the attitudes and beliefs of my Black contemporaries about the possibility of Whites being manipulative or exploitive. The concerns of the group were also my concerns.

Although I did not receive a particularly warm reception from any of the students from other schools, I was never confronted and only made to feel unwelcome once. During one of the luncheons, Alexis and I arrived to find APU's table full. We saw empty seats at another table and filled them. The woman I sat down next to told me that the seat was taken, so

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Alexis and I moved over one chair. No one ever came to claim the seat that I had vacated. I do not know if the seat was actually intended for someone else or if the woman did not want me sitting next to her. I experienced uncertainty about how to interpret the situation because of the possibility that the woman was employing indirect expression to communicate more than what was actually being said (i.e., that I was not welcome to sit next to her). African Americans often make comments about persons or situations indirectly by signifyin'. Signification as a form of indirection allows freedom of expression and discreteness.

My Whiteness was only mentioned on a couple of occasions throughout the Conference. Once, when I was boarding the shuttle bus, I heard a man comment, "White sugar," but his remark seemed light-hearted, not vicious. Another time, during a workshop in which we broke into small groups, a man asked me why I was at the Conference. I did not feel like I had to defend myself because the question seemed to come from genuine interest rather than suspicion. I explained my involvement with Gospel Choir and my interest in APU, and the small group appeared satisfied with my answer. I think it was important that this justification of my presence occurred. The group representative questioned my motives in order to discern whether I was genuine and thus could assess the legitimacy of my attendance at the Conference. I was happy to have the opportunity to explain myself as an individual rather than have unspoken judgments made about me based on the blatant cue of my skin color alone. This sentiment may be indicative of my retainment of my White cultural background within the setting of a Black culture. It also revisits the issue of individualism versus collectivism. I wanted to be a part of and was concerned with the needs of the group, however I also felt compelled to assert my individuality. Although I do not consciously

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identify with White culture, I believe it is possible that I was subconsciously grounded by White cultural traits that prevented me from "going native."

The portion of the Conference in which I felt most welcome was Gospel Choir. I feel that there was a spiritual connection between myself and the other singers that made our interaction comfortable. After the mass choir performance at the Gospel Extravaganza, the evening concluded with a "Call to Discipleship" conducted by ministers. During this time of worship, one of the mass choir participants from another school hugged me and said, "I'm glad you're here sister." I replied, "I'm glad I'm here, too," and I deeply meant it. Gospel Choir had been my point of entry into APU, and continued to be an important point of connection and acceptance.

Although Alexis was the only APU member with whom I interacted on an individual basis during the Conference, for the most part I felt like a part of the group. There was one occasion, however, during which I felt abandoned to a degree. We were at a huge dance party and most of the APU members were sticking together. Our school would be hosting the Conference the following year, so we would often take over the center of the dance floor and chant, "NU!," to generate hype for next year. While we were doing so, people started to form couples and dance together. I suddenly realized that everyone had a dance partner except me. I was left all alone in the middle, looking like a fool. This phenomenon occurred throughout the dance. Sometimes I would dance with Alexis or within an all-female or mixed group, but never did any of the men in APU dance with me one-on-one. I took this occurrence to be a message about my degree of acceptance, indicative of the prevalence of the taboo against interracial dating. I may have been one of the group, but the men were definitely off limits.

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(Interestingly, the one man who asked me to dance was not only from another school, but was of African, as opposed to African American, descent.)

**Interracial Dating Taboo**

This sentiment regarding interracial dating was communicated to me at two other times outside of the Conference. On one occasion, Andre was introducing me to a Black man who was taking classes at UNL, but who was not involved in APU. Upon hearing that I was a member, he asked, "Are you passing?" (meaning Black passing for White). I told him no, I was White. He further inquired, "The Black women let you in there?" I replied, "I'm not trying to date any of the men." My membership then seemed to make sense to him because I understood the limits of my involvement. This understanding exhibits Kim's (1994) concept of host communication competence. I gained knowledge of social norms and rules guiding interpersonal conduct between myself and the Black men in APU, and acted on that knowledge by not violating these norms and rules.

During one weekly APU meeting, a member named Markela performed a poem that was written in the voice of a Black woman speaking to a Black man. Some of the subject matter dealt with the woman confronting the man about his fraternization with White women. The woman told the man that a White woman could never identify with him nor give him what he needed in a mate. After Markela read that part, she interjected, "No offense, Alyson." I was not offended, in fact, I was happy that Markela felt that she could read such a poem in front of me. Although her poem served as another reminder not to cross the line of the touchy interracial dating issue, it also told me that I was a part of the group and members did not feel the need to censor themselves for my sake. Since I had been genuine with them from

the start, they would be real with me, and there was no need to "wear the mask." My friend Shondra told me in retrospect that one key reason that APU was accepting of me and felt comfortable with me was that "I didn't come in wearing a Starter jacket." This statement speaks to my characteristic realness in that I did not cling to superficial or material facets of Black culture in an attempt to fit in and proclaim that I was "down."

The ability and decision of APU's membership to speak freely in front of me was an important indicator of my acceptance within the group. I had taken classes in which Black students shied away from openly disagreeing with or criticizing other Blacks in front of Whites. One Black woman described her hesitancy to do so as "not wanting to air [their] dirty laundry." There was a fear that such divisiveness might be used against them by Whites. However, at APU meetings, folks would vocally disagree. Heated discussions were likely to occur. No agenda items were neglected due to my participation in the meeting. No issues were tabled pending a closed, "Blacks-only" meeting. Grievances against White students, faculty, staff, and administrators were aired in my presence, with no apologies. I mentioned previously that the last thing I wanted was for my membership to be considered an intrusion into APU. By midway through the semester, I do not think that it was.

**Leadership Positions Within APU**

I was not merely allowed to observe APU's meetings in their entirety, but permitted to participate fully. In fact, my participation was enabled. For instance, if I was the first to raise my hand to speak but someone else was given the floor before me, that someone would usually acknowledge my rightful turn and concede the floor to me. Sometimes, members who did not have their hands raised would speak up and say something like, "That ain't right,

Alyson was next," if someone was called on to speak out of turn. Once during an intense debate about the interpretation of APU's Constitution, my request for the floor had gone overlooked for quite a while and I had given up raising my hand. Finally, when a member named Jackie was granted permission to speak, she stated, "I just wanted to hear what Alyson had to say."

This type of encouragement helped me find my voice within APU and feel like a member capable of making valuable contributions to the organization. It is also an example of APU members helping me adapt to Black communication styles. Kochman (1981) notes the differences between Black and White procedures for turn-taking in discussions. The White rule is to raise your hand and take your turn in order when you are recognized. The Black rule, however, is to jump in with a valid point when you can. "If someone is trying to get into the debate but is having difficulty getting a turn and can get more assertive members to notice him [or her], they will often intervene on his [or her] behalf" (p. 26). Such intervention was beneficial to me when I had given up asserting myself in light of the failure of the White turn-taking rule which I had become accustomed to in classroom settings. This intervention also indicates my connection with and acceptance within the group, and the prevalence of standards of politeness adhered to by APU members.

Apparently, the Executive Board also thought that I could make important contributions to APU because I was entrusted with two appointed positions. The original Gospel Choir Chairperson proved unreliable, so part way through the semester I was appointed to take his place as Chair. This appointment was significant because I assumed a leadership position within the group. Andre informed me of the significance and seriousness

by saying, "Black folks don't play with Gospel Choir." Later, I was made Public Relations Chairperson of the Big XII Conference on Black Student Government (to be hosted by APU in the spring of 1998). Since the Conference was a year away, the appointment carried the message that I was welcome, and perhaps expected, to continue my involvement with APU throughout the subsequent school year.

**Social Exclusion?**

Despite my acceptance on the organizational or business-level of APU, I still did not feel quite welcome on the social level. My participation in the group, with the exception of a couple of friendships, was virtually nonexistent outside of the weekly business meetings and formal events. Fortunately, I had a chance to share my concerns about my degree of acceptance at an organizational retreat held near the end of April. The retreat was facilitated by Vivian, a doctoral student and APU member. Its purpose was to discuss members' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the organization, evaluate APU's progress during the semester, and set goals for the following year. All of the retreat participants were asked to respond to the questions of what they liked and disliked about APU. During the portion of the retreat in which we dealt with what we disliked, I expressed my feelings of uncertainty about where I stood with the group. I asked for clarification about my degree of acceptance and sited troublesome examples (i.e. empty chairs next to me, no interaction beyond meetings, no one dancing with me, etc.). A couple of the members in attendance said they considered me a part of the group and that my examples of ostracism were merely oversights. No one seemed to realize the impact of the nonverbal messages I was receiving until I brought them to the attention of the group.

The retreat helped to set my mind at ease, but the events of the next business meeting really affirmed my place within APU. When I arrived, the seats next to me were filled immediately by retreat participants. Following the meeting, I was invited to accompany one of the members to a party the coming weekend. As it turned out, all I had to do was be open with the group about my doubts and concerns, and I experienced a greater degree of acceptance which had only been hindered by a lack of communication. I should mention that although I was not engaging in many activities with APU members outside of meetings and formal events, I did not experience complete social exclusion. I was in fact socially included in that I was let in on gossip and personal matters of the members (e.g., who was mad at whom; who was seen out with whom; who was jealous of whom; who had been calling whom late at night, etc.). That I was trusted with information of this nature indicates that I was "in the loop" socially.

I had approached my penetration into APU cautiously and gradually that first semester. I tested the waters, looking for cues that would tell me to either progress or retreat. I remember one such cue with great fondness because it made me feel so good at the time. Many Black students would lunch together daily at one of the residence hall cafeterias. Whenever I had a free lunch hour, I would approach their table by saying, "Do you mind if I join you?" I asked permission to eat lunch with these folks every time. I was never denied my request. Finally, after countless days of performing this ritual, an APU member named Michael answered me with, "You know you don't have to ask." His simple statement was a mark of approval that made me feel more comfortable in my place within APU. By the end of the spring 1997 semester, I had received enough positive cues that I could do nothing but

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press forward as an APU member.

**Managing My Whiteness**

One key way that the issue of my Whiteness was managed within APU was through the use of humor. For instance, at one meeting my friend Teddy and I both had our hands raised to speak. When I was acknowledged before him, he commented, "That's racial." I replied, "You know it doesn't work that way here." In this joke, he was claiming in jest that I was given the chance to speak before he was because I was White. My reply indicated the fallacy and humor in such an assertion since my White privilege does not operate in the setting of APU meetings. Similarly, I was always guaranteed a laugh by exclaiming in mock offense, "Why's it always gotta be the *White* girl," if I were ever singled out for any reason. Making light of the oxymoron of a White minority eased potential tension surrounding the matter of my race. The fact that I was able to understand and participate in the humor is a mark of intercultural communication competence indicating command of the subtle nuances of the language (i.e., Black vernacular) and its uses in informal or social contexts.

Another way the issue was dealt with was by not making an issue out of my race at all. A few of my friends explained that they did not think of me as Alyson, the *White* APU member. I was simply *Alyson* to them. Who I was as an individual mattered much more to them than did my race. My friend Shondra once told me, "Sometimes I honestly forget [that you're White]." Teddy, also, once said to me, "You ain't White." Statements such as these represent my acculturation into African American culture through APU. I never felt as though people were trying to negate my cultural background, nor did I feel the need to assert my Whiteness in such instances. Rather, I took it as a compliment that APU members were able

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to overlook my race.

I felt this way because of my lack of a strong sense of White identity. According to Collier (1997):

> [Cultural] identities are enacted in interpersonal contexts through avowal and ascription processes. Avowal is the self an individual portrays, analogous to the fact or image she or he shows others. Avowal is the individual saying "This is who I am." Ascription is the process by which others attribute identities to the individual. Stereotypes and attributions communicated are examples of ascriptions. (p. 40)

I avowed my cultural (racial) identity as someone who does not embrace Whiteness as it is defined by White privilege. Therefore, my identity was not ascribed by APU members as a White who "does not understand the permanence and prevalence of racism" or who can not relate to Black culture and issues. Rather, through ascription and avowal, my identity was enacted within APU as more culturally Black than it was racially White.

**Limited Involvement**

Fall 1997

The following summer represented a hiatus of sorts from my involvement with the organization. I went home to Omaha where I had little contact with APU members. I went out occasionally with Raychelle, a member, and spoke with Terrence on the phone once or twice. I was also in touch with Anita, the Co-Chair for the Big XII Conference who was overseeing my Public Relations position. When the fall 1997 semester began, however, I engaged myself with APU immediately. We were very busy from the start with recruitment of the new crop of freshman. We were targeting new Black students, as well as those who were

old or returning, for involvement in APU and in planning the Conference. Since I was the Public Relations Chair for the Conference, I ran a booth at the Black Student Orientation to get people signed up to serve on committees. I became a big recruiter for APU.

My visibility as an APU member was critical at this point. With new students joining the organization, it was important that I be a consistent part of their APU experience from the beginning. Since I had already proved myself to the returning members, I needed to display confidence in their acceptance of me in an attempt to dispel any doubts or skepticism about my involvement on the part of the freshman. When visiting with some of these new members later in the year, I learned that at first they were surprised to see me as an active member, but soon got used to the idea. Some of them even assumed that I had been a part of the organization for longer than I had actually been involved.

Unfortunately, in the fall semester of 1997 I experienced great difficulty in trying to balance my extracurricular commitments with my course work and graduate school search. In order to stay on track academically, it was necessary for me to withdraw from several activities and quit my job at the Culture Center. This withdrawal included stepping down from my position as Conference Public Relations Chair. I was worried that I would be deemed a quitter or that my resignation might be interpreted as retreat of sorts from APU, therefore undermining the credibility I had worked diligently to establish. I had spent so much time becoming a part of the group that I did not want anyone to think that I had suddenly had enough or could not handle it anymore. Fortunately the Conference Advisers and Co-Chairs were all very understanding and supportive of my resignation. I remained active in APU throughout the semester, although not in a leadership position.

As my first semester with APU was eventful, so was my third and final semester with the organization. That spring I was able to step up my involvement in preparing for the Conference because I had a lighter class load. No one had been found to fill my position, so I worked closely with Anita on public relations and advertising for the Conference. In the Conference Booklet I was credited for chairing both the Public Relations and Advertising committees although I had resigned from the former position and was never officially appointed to the latter. Initially, in the fall semester, the Big XII Conference was considered distinct from regular APU business, so planning meetings for the Conference were held outside of the weekly APU meetings. By spring semester, however, the Conference commanded most of APU's time and attention. With the Conference just over two months away, the two meetings merged into one with the Conference being the main item of business. Time was reserved at these meetings, however, to attend to any general APU business as it presented itself.

**Refining My Public Voice**

Although I would not classify it as *general* business, a situation arose on campus in the very beginning of February with which APU was compelled to contend in the midst of its Conference preparations. An English professor had disseminated via mass electronic mail some writings containing incessant usage of the word "nigger." The professor's prose and his subsequent defense of it as a tool intended to unite the Black community in a war against governmental exploitation offended and angered many people, as did the media circus he orchestrated to perpetuate his propaganda. APU was embroiled in debates of free speech

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versus hate speech, professionalism versus intellectual freedom, the use of the word "nigger" among Blacks versus its usage by Whites, racism versus insensitivity, and the like. The situation resurfaced the issue of a campus climate that was uninviting and even hostile to Blacks and other students of color.

Once again, I exercised my public voice as an APU member in press conferences, forums, and meetings surrounding the incident. After one forum sponsored by UNL's student government at which I raised several points, I was complemented by students, faculty, and administrators on my reasoning and arguments. I was also invited by APU's president, Terrence, to be one of five APU representatives in a meeting with the Senior Vice Chancellor. I took the invitation as an indication that I was indeed perceived by APU to be a competent communicator, particularly with this issue of great concern to Black students. The invitation also indicated the high level of acceptance I had reached and the cultural trust placed in me by APU. At the meeting we discussed ways in which the University could improve the campus climate for Black students and faculty. I was honored to be considered an APU member whose insight and ideas would be beneficial to attempts at resolution. At this point I felt not only wanted by APU, but needed as well. I had found a comfortable, functional place within the group that emerged as a result of successful adaptation and acculturation.

The use of my public APU voice made my unique position within the Black Student Government known to people who were not involved with APU, but were interested in the organization. As a result, I established a role as a link or bridge between APU and White students who were concerned about Black student issues on campus but perhaps were unwilling to get directly involved. For instance, I was approached by a Student Assistant in

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one of the Residence Halls to provide her with material for a program she was conducting on race relations. I was also asked by a student in a class for which I was a teaching assistant to share my experiences and philosophies with him, as well as write him a recommendation for an appointment to a Student Government committee on racial affairs. To provide another example, an Assistant Director of Multicultural Affairs approached me to set up a meeting between myself and a freshman student who had demonstrated interest in race relations at a University leadership retreat. I was more than happy to engage in such discussions. Although I would not necessarily advise anyone to follow the same path I did, I certainly encouraged the building of alliances and coalitions.

### Sister Circle

Another development that occurred in the eventful spring semester of 1998 was the introduction of the Sister Circle, an informal discussion group for African American women. Markela conceptualized and implemented this support group, which was held at the Women's Center on campus where she worked. I learned about the group from announcements made at APU meetings, but assumed I was to be excluded. Again, although University policy prevents exclusion from activities on the basis of race, I assumed that an unwritten precept mandating that only Black women were to attend would be operative. And again, I was proven wrong. Several of the women in APU asked if I would be participating in the discussion group, and Markela herself invited me to attend. By now I considered myself one of the group and felt quite comfortable within APU, but I was not sure that I was a "sister." To me, this term implied the existence of an intimate bond that I thought my race might prevent me from achieving. At my first Sister Circle, I told the group that I did not want my presence to inhibit

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their discussion and I offered to leave at any time if such was the case. No one took me up on my offer and I was warmly welcomed into the Circle.

We all grew as sisters during these weekly sessions. We learned invaluable lessons about life from one another, especially from the participation of our wise advisors, professors, and graduate students. Sister Circle empowered the women of APU to stand up for ourselves and be supportive of our sisters in the face of sexism and patriarchy within the organization. In other words, "we had each others' backs." I think my participation in Sister Circle was a key factor in my expansion from a strictly business role within APU to more personal or social involvement.

**Big XII Conference**

My experience at the Big XII Conference on Black Student Government in February of 1998 was extremely different from that of the previous year's Big VIII Conference. Obviously, being involved in the behind-the-scenes preparation and running of a conference differs significantly from being a mere participant. In addition, I think the attitude toward my involvement was one of greater acceptance. I recognized people from the year before and was acknowledged by them. I was approached by attendees for assistance with logistical issues. I worked security at events and was not given any flack. I served as Master of Ceremonies for an event and was received warmly. I wore my hair in cornrows, a traditionally Black hairstyle, and received compliments on it. Finally, I was awarded the Big XII Conference Martin Luther King Award for non-African Americans who have made significant contributions to Black Student Government.

This honor meant more to me than I can sufficiently express. I never expected to

receive recognition for my involvement in APU. All I wanted was to help advance the cause

of Black students at UNL, and hopefully to be accepted as a friend and ally. Such acceptance

was reward enough. That my contributions were recognized in this way was truly humbling.

Unfortunately, however, I was not present at the awards luncheon. I missed the ceremony

because I was in bed recuperating from the loss of my voice due to overexertion at the prior

evening's Gospel Extravaganza. When I arrived later in the day, several people congratulated

me, but for what I did not know because APU had kept secret my nomination. Anthony, an

APU member, joked that my absence at the presentation of the award was indicative that I

was "on C. P. time." This phrase is a reference to the polychronic nature of African-

descended people that refuses to adhere strictly to linear time. Basically, many Black folks are

often running late according to linear standards, and according to Anthony so was I.

Another important Conference happening was meeting poet Nikki Giovanni, our

opening speaker. Dr. Johnson, an APU advisor with whom I had taken an African American

Literature course, invited me, one other student, and a few professors, to have dinner with

Ms. Giovanni before her performance. I felt very fortunate to have been afforded this

incredible privilege. The fact that Dr. Johnson chose me for the honor indicated to me that I

had equal opportunity within APU and was not ignored or passed over because I was White.

### Final Events

As if these honors were not enough, in April I received a Shades of Leadership Award.

The engraving on the award read, "The Culture Center proudly recognizes Alyson Goodall for

enriching the education of students of color at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln." Again, I

did not expect the award, nor had I thought of my contributions as enriching. I was glad that

amidst all the talk about the negative racial climate at UNL, I was someone whose caring perhaps made the environment more tolerable. To have my contributions noted and honored was a wonderful way to bring my final semester in APU, and at UNL, to a close.

This event was not quite the end, however. I can think of one final critical incident pertaining to my involvement in APU. As the end of the semester neared, APU conducted nominations and elections for the next year's Executive Board. The outgoing secretary, Robyn, who must not have realized that I was graduating, nominated me to take over her position. This nomination was precedented in that I had held appointed positions within the organization. However, I believe that the possibility of having a White person holding an elected office within the Black Student Government is extremely significant. No one can say whether or not I would have been elected, but what matters is that they were willing to give me the chance to run.

This experience in its entirety was a process of significant growth for me as an individual. As a result of my work within the Afrikan People's Union, I developed close, meaningful friendships. I transcended racial boundaries in the midst of racial misunderstanding and tension. I advanced my skills as an interculturally competent communicator. I became acculturated into a culture other than my own by means of intense, experiential learning (vice versa, I came to understand a different culture via the acculturation process). I consider my membership in the Black Student Government at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, including all that this membership encompassed, to be a most profound accomplishment.

**Summary**

Kim's (1994) theory of cross-cultural adaptation incorporates the themes of intercultural communication competence and cultural identity. It is therefore useful in summarizing the development of my position within APU. Kim pays particular attention to the role of communication in the adaptation process, addressing it in terms of cognitive, affective, and operational competence of the stranger.

I developed cognitive competence of African American culture prior to and throughout my involvement in APU. Through course work I gained knowledge of their history, world view, and beliefs. By participating in APU meetings I learned the language (i.e., Black vernacular), social norms, and rules of interpersonal conduct. My affective competence included my ability to empathize by approaching understanding of their beliefs and experiences from their point of view. My emotional capacity to handle the challenges accompanying my stranger status is another example of affective competence. Operational competence is the outward manifestation of cognitive and affective competence. For instance, my diligence throughout my entire APU experience is an expression of affective competence, while my ability to understand subtle nuances of Black lingo and humor is a demonstration of cognitive competence.

In addition to intercultural communication competence, conditions of the host environment (APU) and characteristics of the stranger (myself) factor into the process of cross-cultural adaptation. The environmental condition of issue is the receptivity of the host culture. APU was receptive of my membership. Although my reception was not particularly warm in the beginning, and I had to prove myself worthy of equal membership status within

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the group, I was provided the opportunity to do just that. APU was receptive to me to the extent that I was receptive to adapting to the culture.

Preparedness, ethnicity, and personality are characteristics that help define a stranger's predisposition toward cross-cultural adaptation. I think I was well-prepared to approach the environment of APU based on my upbringing and background, my course work in Black Studies, and my relationships with Black faculty members and students. I was also prepared in that my association with APU was voluntary, so I did not resist it as one might an involuntary assignment.

Ethnicity has the potential to influence predisposition and adaptation by presenting linguistic, cultural, and psychological barriers. In my case, it was race, rather than ethnicity, that was influential. There really were no linguistic barriers encountered, as I picked up Black lingo readily through listening and participating in conversations with Blacks. I think my Whiteness did represent a cultural barrier initially since it was a such potent visual cue. It was probably difficult at first for APU members to overlook my skin-color because of what it represented (e.g., oppression by "the man," a predominantly White campus, a hostile campus climate). Psychologically, however, I believe such obstacles were overcome in time as people got to know me personally.

Finally, personality traits of openness and strength are relevant to the discussion of predisposition. I think my diligence is indicative of the persistence and patience that are components of strength. I never gave up, pushing forward to higher levels of acceptance and involvement. I was confident in myself and the road I had chosen. Openness, too, was definitely key. This characteristic allowed me to process, learn, and apply new information

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about APU and Black culture. It helped me adopt new communication styles and methods. It gave me a foundation from which to develop a capacity for empathy. It enabled me to embrace our differences and uncover our similarities. Knowing in my heart that there was a role and a place for me within the organization, I was open to the potential for the personal change growth that would allow me to fill those positions. Without openness and strength I would have never become acculturated into APU.

According to Kim (1994):

Should strangers choose to become successfully adapted, they must, above all, be prepared and willing to face the stressful experiences of coping with the uncertainties and anxieties in an unfamiliar milieu. They must concentrate on acquiring new cultural communication practices and putting aside some of the old ones. They must recognize the importance of host communication competence as the fundamental mechanism by which they adapt successfully. Through openness and strength of personality, strangers can better overcome temporary setbacks and embrace cultural differences. They must also maximally participate in the interpersonal and mass communication processes of the host society. Through active participation, the strangers can in turn develop a more realistic understanding of, and appreciation for, the native culture and ways of life. (p. 401)

By George, I think I've got it!

**Conclusion**

As a scholar of communication with an emphasis in interpersonal and intercultural interaction, this experience allowed me to put what I learned as an undergraduate into practice. To quote 1997 Big VIII Conference speaker Dr. Kesho Scott, who attributed the expression to Reverend Jesse Jackson, "Don't think that you're getting an education just because you're in college." When I embarked on my journey within APU, I exposed myself to an experiential learning situation that surpassed any level of education I could have received in the classroom alone. I believe that intercultural communication competence, although formal study and background are helpful preparation, is reached through direct experience.

This emphasis on "real world" intercultural communication and "living" the intercultural experience is particularly relevant to today's discussions of diversity, sensitivity, and multiculturalism. Especially on the campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which has been deemed racially hostile by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, finding common ground, such as that found between myself and the members of the Afrikan People's Union, is essential. It is time to stop giving lip-service to the celebration of diversity, and begin to work on how we can communicate with one another despite our differences. It will not be easy. It takes time. I was not able to simply proclaim myself communicatively competent and proceed to advance the causes of Black students. It took me two years to reach a comfortable point within APU in which I felt like an equal.

I would advise other socially-conscious Whites to set aside their White privilege and seek out meaningful experiences with Blacks and other people of color. Focus on coalition-building. I would not necessarily recommend that all Whites join Ethnic minority

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organizations. My case was unique. There was a good fit between APU and myself. Both sides, host and stranger, were ripe for the challenge. I can not ensure that a comparable endeavor on the part of anyone else would have similar results.

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