



REFLECTIONS ON RACE, THE BODY AND BOUNDARIES

How to Get on the Bus

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Drawing inspiration from the work of dancer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham, this paper explores strategies for teaching about both the experience of race and the ethnography of race. Focusing specifically on ways to encourage students to explore the embodiment of race as it intersects with politics of power, strategies to use both within and outside the classroom are explored. Methods emphasize both in-classroom strategies, and those that take students beyond the classroom – and specifically – onto the bus. The setting is the United States, and here the bus has specific historical and cultural resonance. The strategies are transferable and widely applicable (with adjustments for cultural and historical context) to a variety of sites.

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In this exploration of irregular ethnography, I am interested in thinking about teaching ethnography, specifically the ethnography of race.* All human experiences are profoundly embodied (whether or not we want to admit it) but race, in particular, adheres to bodies in ways that are at once obvious and yet obscured. Race resides in the skin, or so it seems, and the growing folk belief is that race also resides in our genes. These and other racial ideologies profoundly shape the way we perceive both our own bodies and those of others, particularly in the United States where race-consciousness is embedded in daily life and experiences. Anthropology is steadfast in denying the scientific validity of race, while also acknowledging that race, as a social fact, possesses extraordinary power. For students this quickly becomes complicated in the extreme: how can our own bodies be at once real and

yet utterly ideological? These conundra are only intensified because in anthropology we are quite adept at writing about inequality and injustice in their many forms, while remaining reticent about approaching the body as an instrument through which we might teach and learn ethnographically substantive material. After all, talking and writing are the main forms of dispensing ethnographic knowledge; the discipline has yet to give much weight to feeling and doing as ways to either teach, learn, or conduct research. Convinced that attention to feeling and doing is an essential first step in developing not only an ethnographic eye, but an interpretive foundation, my strategy is to build ethnographic exercises that force my students to examine who they are, challenging their preconceptions about selves and others. I characterize these strategies as learning to “get on the bus,” an image that

has important material, geographic, and social resonance in the United States.

Dominated as it is by car culture, Los Angeles is a city where the bus is a powerful medium through which divisions of class and race are perpetuated and delineated. Unlike New York, where a great many people are thrown together on a regular basis for daily commutes, in Los Angeles those who walk or rely on public transportation are overwhelmingly poor and black, brown, or yellow. Thus, the bus itself is a racialized space in Los Angeles, and one which most of my students have never encountered as users of the system. The bus is also a powerful symbol of the civil rights struggle, enshrined in the image of Rosa Parks, a civil rights activist, whose historic refusal to sit at the back of the bus is understood as a turning point in the desegregation of American society. My aim is to awaken in students a sense of personal engagement with such questions as segregation and social justice; going beyond mastery of theory and critique, I want them also to grasp the ways in which their own bodies are involved in the creation and maintenance of boundaries of difference and inequality – and to recognize the potential they hold for unmaking those boundaries. This requires self-reflection in the context of ethnographic exploration. In beginning to build an embodied approach to such ethnographic exploration, I turn to Katherine Dunham, a dancer and anthropologist whose own ethnographic use of bodies approached these issues in ways that remain radical today.

For this discussion I build in part upon work that emerged in the late 1980s in what is commonly called “the reflexive turn” in anthropology. Focusing in particular on emotions and the self, Renato Rosaldo’s “Grief and the Headhunter’s Rage” (1993) recounted with wrenching clarity the way that his own wife’s untimely death allowed him to understand, for the first time, what made the Ilongot headhunters among whom he had long studied want to hunt heads; Ruth Behar took up the call for what she called “Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart” (1997). It was during this period, too, that such prominent figures as Victor Turner (1988) and Richard Schechner (1985) explored anthropology of performance. The topic of race made few, if any appearances in this area of enquiry. It is be-

yond the scope of this essay to review the growing literatures on performance and the body; what I wish to note, however, is that well before what is often called “the postmodern turn,” Katherine Dunham was herself developing a race-conscious and social justice oriented approach to anthropology and performance, ethnography and the body.

Dunham was a pioneer in ethnographic exploration, and was among the first ethnographers of dance; despite her importance to the history of anthropology, her work is little known and generally considered not especially anthropological. As pointed out by dance ethnographer Yvonne Daniel (MacDonald 1989), the early key texts on the anthropology of dance make no mention of Dunham at all, despite her critically important work in the development of the anthropology of dance (Royce 1977; Hanna 1979). The literature on her anthropological work is virtually non-existent: searches of various indexes yield fewer than five peer-reviewed articles dealing with her oeuvre in ways that go beyond a sentence or two of description (Fischer-Hornung 2001, 2008; Hill 2005; Kraut 2003). Strikingly, none are by anthropologists. This neglect arises, I argue, from the fact that she was black, she was a woman, and she used her body to perform ethnography – something of a scandalous act.

In 1940, Adeli Linton (wife of anthropologist Ralph Linton) wrote to Dunham to ask her to review a book for *American Anthropologist*, saying “I was wondering if your Broadway success has made you loose [sic] interest in the academic background of your art. After all, it is the authenticity, as well as the technique and showmanship, of your work which makes your performance so satisfying” (1940). In Linton’s formulation, dance technique and showmanship take Dunham away from the “authenticity” of what Dunham has to say as an anthropologist; serious anthropology, presumably, lacks these qualities, being neither performative nor showy (this lack of showmanship might help to explain those deadly paper presentations at anthropological conferences!). Dunham herself seems to have experienced no such conflict and replied reassuringly that “by no means has my theatre interest made me wish to abandon Anthropology. It has just been hard to bring the two together in a concrete way, and

at any little intervals at which I might accomplish this I am indeed very happy” (1940).

From this very early point it is evident that Dunham was committed to a course in which her ethnographic expertise would find expression in dance, and upon the stage. As she says in her reply to Linton, her goal is to bring anthropology and performance “together in a concrete way,” and I would argue that this “concrete way” is primarily her technique, choreography, and in performances. In choosing this path, Dunham implicitly forwarded the idea that ethnography need not be written to do its work. In fact, in choosing the stage and studio as her ethnographic milieu, it is quite likely that Dunham was able to teach/preach/reach anthropology to a significantly wider audience than her academic peers. Today, as anthropologists worldwide seek to build profiles as “public intellectuals,” Dunham’s early embrace of extra-academic audiences seems prescient.

Dunham’s focus on the body as a site through which ethnographic knowledge can be both produced and communicated was – and remains – a radical vision for the possibilities of anthropology. As the discipline of dance ethnography has grown and become established, numerous scholars have explored the way dance and the body create and contain knowledge, ideology, and politics. Most notable is the work such as that by Savigliano (1995) and Sklar (1991) whose analyses emphasize the potential that dance ethnography has for illuminating broader cultural and political issues, and for reimagining ethnography itself. Dunham’s work continues to be neglected; part of my aim here is to demonstrate the continuing relevance of her efforts, in particular the relevance for ethnography as a tool of social justice action. Thus, in this paper I focus on aspects of Dunham’s efforts to understand how she worked ethnographically to present before wide audiences a point of view about race and racism, and to illustrate how these lessons can be brought home to students in meaningful ways.

Katherine Dunham (and me)

Best known for her pioneering work in the arena of African American dance, Katherine Dunham trained in anthropology with Melville Herskovits, and also

studied with Robert Park at the University of Chicago. The daughter of a French Canadian mother (who also had first nations ancestry) and an African American father, Dunham was born into a world where divisions of race mattered mightily. She found dance rather late, as a teenager, but was unable to attend regular ballet classes because she was not white. Her teacher, Ludmilla Speranzeva, would open her studio early in the mornings so that Katherine could take class on her own. Later, when Dunham opened her own ballet studio in the Chicago area, she faced landlord trouble because the building’s owner did not want an establishment for a black clientele in his building. Throughout her career, Dunham worked to defy the racial boundaries around her: she famously refused to perform in front of segregated audiences, was among the first to form an integrated dance company in the United States, and had her company perform her work *Southland* even in the face of disapproval from the American government over Dunham’s exploration of the social impact of lynching (Hill 2005).

In 1935 with a fellowship from the Rosenwald Foundation, she traveled to the Caribbean to study the social role of dance in Jamaica, Martinique, and Haiti. For the remainder of her long life she traveled back to Haiti regularly, and with her special affinity for the religious dances of the Vodou, she was influential in bringing these much maligned and misunderstood traditions to the stage. Most of her choreography explored aspects of life in the African Diaspora, whether ceremony in Haiti or jealous combat in Martinique, as in her ballet *L’ag Ya*. These choreographies were always meticulously researched, and Dunham habitually used musicians who were experts in the traditions she put upon the stage. The result was theater, but theater with a deeply ethnographic foundation. Her signature dance *Barrelhouse* illustrated the loneliness that can inhabit the core of the lively urban center, using jook-joint moves typical of city bars and dance halls; remembering the subjects of the classic Chicago School ethnographies – *The Taxi Dance Hall* (Cressey 1932), or *The City* (Park et al. 1925) – the influence of the Chicago School ethnographic tradition on her choice of topic and location for the piece is hard to miss.

I came to an interest in Katherine Dunham not be-

cause I am an anthropologist, but rather through my long engagement with Haitian folkloric dance. It was all an accident: one day when I was an undergraduate student in the drama department at New York University, a friend dragged me to a Haitian dance class and shortly thereafter, though I had trained solely in ballet and modern dance, Haitian was the only dance I was interested in. It was not until ten years later – when I had finished graduate school in anthropology – that it dawned on me that I could put my anthropology head into my dancing body. I began traveling to Haiti, learned to speak Kreyol, and studied with dancers in and around Port au Prince.

Dancers have a thing that they call “muscle memory.” The idea is that when you learn certain movements or sequences and do them enough times, your body remembers how to do them and your mind no longer has to consciously make the attempts to move your body the right way. After years of studying Haitian dance, I realized that in addition to acquiring muscle memory, I had entered a stream of cultural memories. Haitian dance comes in many forms, but the emphasis in folkloric dance is upon the religious dances from the Vodou religion. These dances are always about something, that is, they are never abstract. For example, the dance Ibo is named for the Ibo people, who still live in Nigeria today. During the slavery era, the Ibo were known as bad slaves, which is to say that they were highly uncooperative with slavery. Being fierce, defiant and proud, the Ibo routinely resisted the situation in which they found themselves by committing suicide, running away, or even killing their children. The Ibo dance explores this defiance and resistance, and the movements involve working in fields, breaking chains, running toward freedom. Ibo, like all the dances, always has both historical and contemporary relevance: the struggles of the Ibo represent the struggles of the slaves long ago, but they also represent continuing struggles people face because of poverty, unfair treatment, and oppression. Ibo, then, embodies the spirit of resistance that is deeply rooted in Haiti, and the radical capacity for perseverance that has allowed Haitians to endure through terrible times.

As a person who is half-Chinese, half WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) I can hardly say that my own

personal or ancestral memories are rooted in slavery and revolution in Haiti: the cultural memories embedded in the Ibo are not in that sense my own. Through years of practice, though, I realized that in doing the Ibo – and other dances – I had learned things about Haitian history and culture I would never have understood otherwise. My dancing had given me muscle memories pertinent to Haiti and its struggles, and through this dancing, I understood those struggles in an embodied way that “normal” fieldwork or research would never have afforded me. Dancing until you think you are about to vomit from exhaustion gives some sense of the physical demands of fighting slavery, and when you keep on going anyway, you learn something about getting through impossible tasks.

I believe that Katherine Dunham understood these things quite early on, and that her anthropology and teaching were both built upon the power of muscle memory and the dancing body. It was Dunham’s own advisor, Melville Herskovits, who told her she needed to choose between scholarship and art. Dunham did leave the academy and did not pursue a career as a professor, and yet she did not leave anthropology behind when she became a full time artist, and it is precisely this refusal to draw the line between scholar and artist that has made Dunham so “irregular” as an ethnographer. She integrated the two perspectives, producing choreography that was deeply anthropological and at the same time ethnographic. After her company shut down in the 1950s, Dunham moved to East St. Louis, a primarily African American community that has for a century or more been one of the nation’s most extreme cases of poverty and urban blight. Here, Dunham established a school and concentrated on using the arts as a way to build social change, once again through training bodies in disciplined creativity and expression. Through her choreography and her teaching Dunham continually leveraged her ethnographic knowledge and practice to stretch the boundaries of anthropology, showing how ethnography can contribute to social justice.

Teaching with the Body: Studio Rules

In the United States it is bad manners to claim to see race, which is why on the first day of my race class, I

give students the race identification test that can be found on the alllookslike.com website. This test asks respondents to view and racially identify 18 pictures of Asians, each of whom is either Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. Having been bombarded all their lives by tests having right answers, students usually jump into the task with few objections. As we compare answers, they sometimes give out high fives for correct items, or shake their heads in shame when they find out their guess was incorrect. The exercise serves to illustrate several important principles: first, the degree to which they mobilize received notions about race in the first place; second, the importance of social cues such as fashion in making racial determinations; third, the overriding power of powerful discourses in which individual choices are constrained and problematic. Thus, from the beginning, we engage a discussion of the bodily nature of racial ideology as well as the real ways in which we are interpellated as racial subjects inside and outside the university classroom, and the kinds of powerful discourses that shape our every move.

From the outset, then, I endeavor to make sure that students are learning through their bodies. While many dance researchers have pointed out the profoundly important nature of embodied knowledge (Ness 1992; Sklar 1999), university classrooms are not often places where bodily knowing is pedagogically addressed. I do this by using many teaching methods that come from the dance studio. In the academy, classroom bodies are very often passive bodies. Passive bodies are not great settings for lively minds. A classroom environment for lively minds keeps the body engaged on a regular basis. One of the primary differences between the scholarly classroom and class in a dance studio is the expectation of engagement, and these expectations can be very useful in the academic classroom. A Dunham technique class always begins with breathing exercises based in karate and yoga. Teachers explain that the point of these exercises is for the dancer to clear and center the mind and to oxygenate and energize the body in preparation for working. Thus, from the first moment in a Dunham class (and most dance classes) it is well established that students are expected to work. While I do not go so far as to ask my students to engage in breathing exercises,

I do find ways to work against both their physical and thus mental passivity in an effort to set an expectation that the classroom is a place for all of us to be actively engaged in the enterprise of learning. It is worth noting that there is a rather odd juxtaposition of authoritarian and liberatory aims here – through setting clearly defined expectations within the classroom, one can frame a space that encompasses certain freedoms. This perspective is often found in arts training, where students are berated by uncompromising taskmasters so that they might discipline themselves and in so doing, transcend the limits of discipline to leap into the realm of artistic creativity. My approach shares the basic commitment to discipline, in that it seems impossible to me for students to do outstanding work unless they are able to both meet high standards, and demand them of themselves.

At a basic level, this is what I ask of students: no lateness, no sleeping, and no wandering attention. I find this eliminates stress on me and makes my job much easier. Though I am strict about these expectations, I am not mean or cruel, and I hold myself to them as well: late students may be admitted to the room if they bring me a flower (students caught picking flowers on our campus face a \$500 fine). If I am ever late to class, then I owe the class donuts or home-baked treats (I admit I try to be late to class at least once a semester so they can reap that reward). When a student enters late, I stop talking, and wait until I get my flower and the student is seated. I usually stick the flower behind my ear and say something nice if it matches my outfit. Then we resume. If students fall asleep in class, my solution is to ask them to do a few jumping jacks or push-ups. This has the advantage of getting their blood moving and literally waking them up in addition to making them do something silly but slightly embarrassing in front of the class. When the entire class has a bout of low energy I might have all of us do jumping jacks or laps around the room. Getting students moving jogs their muscle memory, and unsticks them from bad mental habits associated with oppressive pedagogies and learning environments.

One of the primary differences in dance pedagogy is that no dance students can hide in the back of the room as students so commonly attempt to do when

at school. In the studio lines are regularly rotated so that every student is in the front line at some point during each class; while dance classes are still highly authoritarian, they do not allow any student to shrink into the shadows as an academic classroom can do. At a minimum, in a classroom where chairs cannot be moved around, I often break students into groups for a portion of class time, and form the groups in such a way that students must get up and move. More ideal is a classroom where you can reconfigure the room, whether placing all students into a circle, making lines, small groups, or dispensing with seating altogether and engaging in a fully physical exercise or even just sitting on the floor. For my part I make sure to circulate physically throughout the space so that students at least have to move their gaze around; I aim to make contact with each student in the room whether through physical proximity or some kind of comment or request, so that again, sinking into the shadows becomes an impossibility. The goal here is to keep everyone engaged and it sometimes takes a light touch; usually I am not interested in intimidating my students, though every once in a while intimidation has its uses.

It is important to demand integrity and engagement. In dance class often a single student is called upon to demonstrate a particular exercise for the entire class. Typically, after the student has completed the demonstration, the rest of the students provide some polite applause. Not so in Dunham's classes. When such polite applause followed a student's demonstration when Miss Dunham was teaching, she quickly shushed us. "Don't clap," she said. "Was that performance worth applauding? Did you even think about it?" The criticism was not aimed at the student, who had done fine work. Rather, it was directed at us. Her message was never to do something out of habit, without thinking about what you are doing. This is an important and useful principle in the classroom, where students very often say things that may make sense, but in fact have no meaning whatever. I have a colleague who says of students that "they open their mouths and their parents come out!" Press students to clarify what they mean, and why they are saying something. Have they really thought about it, or is the statement just one of those things everyone says?

Teaching them good technique is not optional. Dunham was ridiculously demanding. I remember being in class in St. Louis during the summer – it was over 90 degrees with 90 percent humidity, and she had us performing one particular move over and over for forty-five minutes. This move involved hopping on one leg while lifting the other leg to the front (as high as possible, that is, with your foot up in front of your face – or higher, if possible), moving it around to the side and then to the back. "Higher," she said. "Higher." For forty-five minutes. We were exhausted, but we did fine, largely because we were all well trained and knew how to deal with the demands being put upon us. The predictability of a dance class is one of its great comforts: you start at the barre, go through exercises that remain similar in their content each time, proceed to across-the-floor exercises and then onto a combination. While it can all get quite demanding, knowing the end is in sight can make the demands bearable. Academic classes do not possess such inherent rhythms, which is too bad. Feeling the temperature of the classroom, though, sometimes means just backing off and taking a break. In dance, we talk of good technique and its importance for allowing dancers to work hard while avoiding injury. Managing stress is a good academic technique.

At Occidental College, student uprisings predictably take place toward the end of the semester, just before finals. This is when everyone on campus is worn down to a nub, and while the issues students take up are substantial and important, it seems no accident that usually they are moved to action only when they are at the height of their stress in the rest of their lives. As are the faculty. When one of my classes seemed especially stressed out and confused, I had them all lie on the floor as they did in nursery school and I read them stories. In some classes I have taken my students through guided relaxation for 10 or 15 minutes. Students need to learn to manage their stress just as much as they need to learn content because it's how they learn to get through the full on 90 degree 90 percent humidity days.

Teaching with the Body: Foucault

One of my favorite ways to use the body in teaching is when students are having their first struggles with Foucault's theories of power. American students find

the writing style circuitous and difficult to follow; the ideas are terrifying in their abstractness and even more terrifying in their implications for how students think about themselves. Bringing it down to basics helps to illustrate the real ways in which Foucault's ideas make sense, and, moreover, shows quite baldly how we all are caught up in the dynamics of power Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1980).

Regardless of the spatial arrangement of a particular classroom, students tend to sit in the same seats day after day. I ask them: "Why do you sit in the same seats?" Usually the answers (even after reading Foucault) have to do with personal choice and personal preference: "I am comfortable here," they say, or "I like this seat." I ask them how many had assigned seating in elementary school, and most indicate that they did. Then I ask if they liked having assigned seating, and most indicate they did not. So then I ask again: "Why are you sitting in the same seat every day? Don't you see what you are doing? Even though you didn't like being required to sit in the same seat when you were younger, now you do it without anybody asking you to. I don't even have to bother dominating or disciplining you. You do it to yourself! That's what Foucault is talking about!"

This revelation allows us to segue into a critical discussion of the power dynamics embedded in the spatial arrangement of classrooms. The overtly hierarchical traditional arrangement with students in lines facing a lecturer makes it virtually impossible for students to converse with each other, and enforces a back-and-forth discussion (if there is indeed discussion) entirely moderated by the lecturer who is the only participant who can view the entire class. A circle breaks up this dynamic, giving students the ability to see and relate to each other; small groups take away the central leadership role from the lecturer and require individual groups to mount conversations of their own. When students understand some of the pedagogical ideas behind this movement, I find they tend to embrace it more fully. Even so, however, students often remain reticent to move about. Nearly every time we break into small groups, for example, I find myself saying: "That means stand up and move

your body! Group one in that corner! Group two in that corner!" When they know that they will experience a variety of social and spatial arrangements in class they also develop a greater flexibility in adjusting to these different situations and can think about why they might find themselves working better in one arrangement versus another.

This tendency for students to self-assign seating is so prevalent and so powerful that I work to subvert it in all of my classes regardless of whether we have an in-depth discussion of the Foucauldian implications on the social organization of space. There are no studies that I know of, but it seems to me that when you let students sink into habits formed by a regime aimed at suppressing their creative thought, you are less likely to get creative thoughts out of them. By allowing them to occupy the same seats day after day, they also continue to occupy the same habits of mind. I try never to go more than two or three classes running without rearranging the space, requiring students to move about, or taking class out of the classroom entirely. Even in small seminar classes, I make a point of changing seats for each class session.

In a mild climate such as the one we enjoy in Southern California, these kinds of shake-ups are admittedly easier than it might be elsewhere, because going outdoors for class is often an option. There are a range on non-classroom spaces that can be used for teaching whether on a regular basis or only on occasion. Leaving aside the obvious value of field trips, at different times I have taught academic classes in the dance studio, in our trustee board room, in the lounge of our Women's Center, outdoors on the grass, in a computer lab, and via Skype. Each of these spaces has provided interesting ways to reshape the dynamic of learning by repositioning our bodies and thinking in social spaces often not associated with learning and serious thinking. Our Women's Center, for instance, was a space with specific political echoes, having been established specifically as a safe space for women, and being one of the few spaces on campus that was created as a hybrid educational and residential setting. The bottom floor of the converted house was taken up by a large lounge area, filled with couches and tables, where informational events were often scheduled: safe

sex workshops, lectures by visitors, or film screenings. This space had the feeling of a living room and was lived-in and warm. It was also a space in which faculty and students tended to mingle more freely than was common on most of the rest of campus. Teaching a course there was helpful, I believe, in allowing students and myself to establish an ethic of comfort and respect that surpassed even my most successful courses previously. Furthermore, we interacted much more as colleagues and peers than teacher and students. Our discussions were more free-flowing than I had found in most other classes, and students also showed a marked independence in both their thinking and in their independent research.

Choreographing Social Change

If ethnography is about anything, it is about exploring, and venturing into places one might not normally go. This is something ethnographers do habitually and with relish. Forget the distant jungles of darkest Africa: a surprising number of my students have not even ventured more than a block or two off campus.

When I conducted my own fieldwork in New Haven, Connecticut, I was struck by the racial boundaries that clearly marked out areas of the city. These boundaries were maintained by the same kind of unspecified fear displayed by my students, and these boundaries were as effective as that famous German wall, only they did not need even to be guarded or patrolled. Nobody attempted to breach those borders. At the time, I did not know how to drive, and so I walked each day from the neighborhood where I was living into the neighborhood where I was doing my fieldwork. To save money, I had elected to live with my godparents, whose home is located in one of the fancier neighborhoods in New Haven; the neighborhood where I conducted my fieldwork lies perhaps half a mile away, and the two areas are separated by a good-sized hill. In more than a year and a half of fieldwork, I was the only person I knew of who walked from one side of that hill to the other. In my godparents' neighborhood, populated by Yale professors, doctors, and lawyers, people would look at me with concern and say, "You walk over there? Do you think you should be doing that? It's dangerous over there!" In Newhallville, which lay on the other side,

a poor and working-class black community suffering from the deindustrialization of the 1990s, I was asked pretty much the same question: "You walk over there? That's not safe!" I had fantasies where people living on each side of the hill would simply walk up to Prospect Street, which runs right across the ridge of this division, walk up to each other, and say "hello."

I am continually struck by how willing my students are to venture ethnographically in their reading, but not in their movements through the city in which they are living. They master the art of speaking about difference in sophisticated ways, and evidence of their cosmopolitan attitudes is evident in their friendships, their taste in films, their eclectic reading lists. Nevertheless, most live well inside what we call "the Oxy bubble," a rarefied patch of the city set apart by a circular road within which the campus, in all its well-tended and photo-ready glory, is enclosed. Here students can talk about the politics of race until blue in the face – but what do they really, viscerally understand when it comes to racial difference?

If it is difficult to teach students to "see" ethnographically, it is often equally (if not more) challenging to get them to embody ethnography, that is, to understand the ways that their physicality and their senses have been culturally shaped. The first step is to remember that ethnographers are not simply seeing eyeballs floating in space and recording information, but that they are deeply, profoundly, and irrevocably embodied. As with all ethnographic knowledge, understanding how one's own culture and predispositions shape and condition one's engagement with the world is an important first step in being able to move toward developing an understanding of how others may move through that world in very different ways.

In choreographing *Southland* Katherine Dunham quite purposefully wanted her multiracial troupe to struggle intimately with the question of racial violence. *Southland* "recontextualized historical 'facts' and dancers' biographies, new dramatic choreography and old musical numbers, thereby enabling dancers to more truthfully internalize, or embody, the materials," writes Constance Valis Hill (2006: 350). The single word uttered in the piece is "Nigger!" which had to be shouted out by Julie Robinson, the only white

member of the troupe at the time. As Ms. Robinson recounts, working to portray American racism on the stage required the company's dancers to confront their own racial identities – something they had been able to avoid for an unusually long time because of the unusually integrated nature of the company. On the one hand Dunham had worked devilishly hard to create an atmosphere in which the divisions of race did not keep her dancers apart: her studio, which operated from the mid-1940s and 1950s in the Times Square area of New York City, was a famously deracialized and unsegregated location. While the creation and maintenance of her studio as a race-free space was certainly one of Dunham's goals, when she took on the question of race in her choreography, this meant that her dancers had to take it on as well, and so the nastiness of racial division was brought back to them in ways they were largely unprepared for. After all, they had just spent all this time getting over race, and now they had to get all the way back into it. At the same time, because this was all being funneled through the disciplined approach of artistic production and creation of choreography, there was a structure through which much of this confrontation took place. While little is known about the intimate dynamics between the dancers and Dunham regarding their own racial awareness and thoughts, what evidence is available shows that the company members engaged in a deep and complicated exploration of their own racial identities and racism in the United States – a kind of “conversation” that was utterly unusual for the time in part because of its intensity, but also because it involved people of different races and nationalities (Hill 2005, 2006).

We in the United States are still not particularly good at talking about race, it makes us uncomfortable to take it on directly. Moreover, in what is often claimed to be a “postracial” society, students typically deny or submerge their own racialized experiences, especially when these students are white and such recognition might involve admitting prejudice. In their account of collaboratively staging a racially-tinged version of the Orpheus myth with Yale undergraduates, authors explain that their students “grasped the fact of historical segregation” but that students could not bring themselves to recreate that segregation be-

cause “staging such a scenario on twenty-first-century bodies proved too morally uncomfortable to fathom” (Cermatori et al. 2009: 10).

Such is the perspective of great privilege. Yale is located in New Haven, Connecticut, and this is where I conducted my dissertation fieldwork (2001). While these students may have balked at representing segregation in their theatrical production, they were living in a city that has long been profoundly segregated by race. Those hopeful, postracial students could only have asserted their denial of racism from safely within the confines of their elite university, an institution with an endowment of 16.1 billion dollars – a sum considerably larger than the annual gross domestic product of a whole host of nations. The racialized others who inhabit the lands outside the walled and gated campus grounds cannot similarly evade the impact that race has on their lives. One of the people I knew well in New Haven used to say she went down by campus to “look at those people who walk funny!” In this context, her comment underscores the degree to which race is both spatial and embodied, and indeed, her comment was accompanied by a hilarious parody of a white way of walking. Students at Occidental are not so different from those at Yale in yearning for their own postracial utopia, while doing so from inside the safety of the campus boundary. With the majority of families in proximity of the campus living on wages of \$18,000 per year or less, I take pains to remind students that the yearly tuition, room and board cost for a single student supports something between 7 and 15 people only a block or two away. In ways large and small, I view much of my work as nudging or catapulting students over the barriers that prevent them from recognizing their own investment in, and experiences of, racial inequality.

In a recent class assignment in a course I teach on race, determined to ensure my students had an embodied experience of racially marked social spaces, I asked them to take public transportation to one of several locations in Los Angeles. Their choices were MacArthur Park, Echo Park, and Union Station. Each of these sites I know well; each is lively and interesting. MacArthur Park was once a rough place, even in the daytime, but in recent years, and with the aid of a

strong police presence, it has become widely used and is perfectly safe during the day and is set at the center of a bustling commercial strip catering to immigrants from Central America. Echo Park, set in an increasingly gentrifying neighborhood, is the site of numerous cultural festivals, and because its lake is regularly stocked with fish, it is a popular spot for anglers, families, and picnickers. Union Station is the city's transportation hub, a spectacular art deco landmark often seen in films, and like so many central train stations, a great place for people-watching. On a given afternoon one is likely to see Mennonites, tourists, businesspeople and homeless people.

Most of my students, I found, first had to scale the hurdle of their fear (later, I learned that they also were managing the fear of their parents, some of whom apparently thought the assignment was unreasonably dangerous). In reading through my students' accounts of these trips, the fear was strongly present, but I kept asking them: fear of what? The fear was generalized, inchoate – but finding themselves on the bus with old Chinese ladies and Latino moms toting babies, it was nearly impossible for them to articulate what, exactly, they were afraid of. Getting mugged? Getting lost? Getting spoken to in a language they did not speak?

What most of them admitted, when we talked about it, was that their fears – and those of others – were the primary boundary-maker in their experiences. At worst, some of them found their excursions boring or nerve-racking. Many found themselves having impromptu conversations with people they met, whether bus drivers, passersby, or merchants.

For us, the bus is a powerful symbol of both the enactment of racial boundaries, and the potential to resist them. One of our national myths features the story of Rosa Parks, sentimentalized as a simple, and simply tired seamstress (when in fact she had a long involvement in the civil rights movement). Like my imagined New Haven residents, she challenged the realness of racial segregation through an astoundingly simple act: taking a seat on the bus. As I myself have begun thinking more deeply about the possibilities embedded in asking my students to take their seats on the bus, I plan to make this exercise even more central in their learning about the ways that racial boundaries operate

in their lives and experiences. Part of what moves me is the utter dailiness of something like the bus, something we see every day, but which, when asked to get on board, launches my students into a world unknown and unexplored. These worlds are ideological, personal, and historical. We might imagine busses, with their routes and timetables, drawing maps of racial difference across the geographies of the city and of our psyches. Getting on the bus is as much a political act as it is one of potential self-transformation. I have no illusions. Many of my students may never take the bus again, but my hope is that in learning viscerally how much and how deeply they participate in creating their own segregation, and their own racially constrained worlds, they will continue to find opportunities to unmake the very boundaries they have hitherto found all too unbreachable.

Conclusion

Asking my students to explore the city by taking public transportation is one of the ways I have invented to create opportunities to identify similar self-imposed boundaries, and perhaps to try crossing them. In the process, the aim is for students to develop an ethnographic understanding of the ways in which their lives are shaped by ideas about race but which their experience as being more about individual choices connected to perceptions of safety and danger, comfort and discomfort, good and evil, boredom and excitement. These choices, like their affections for a particular classroom seat, are not especially individual, being tied quite closely to larger structural forces and ideologies. I suspect that even after having this “aha” moment, many of my students retreat back into the safety of the Oxy bubble, and refrain from crossing the boundaries that have been revealed to them. However I also hope that having made the realization that these borders exist while remaining utterly “made up” they might shift their habits away from shoring up these divisions and experiment with breaching them.

This is the kind of ethnographic intervention that Dunham herself practiced and which I believe has continuing potential for furthering the practice of irregular ethnography in ways that contribute to social change in the interest of social justice. Although my

discussion is situated within the United States, and attends to issues pertinent to our own cultural dilemmas, the process and approach is one that is hardly limited to addressing race and riding the bus. With a bit of imagination and creativity, other issues such as immigration, citizenship and healthcare could be explored in similar fashion. As a result, in addition to asking students to master theories and learn the nuances of cultural comparison, our aim might also be to urge students to ethnographically re-experience their bodies as being “made up” by culture, and to explore their own potential for remaking their bodies and boundaries in shapes that reflect their visions of what a good society might be.

Note

- * Participating in the Irregular Ethnographies workshop was an extraordinarily rich and productive experience. Thanks to the organizers and participants for the original and out-of-the box thinking and conversation. I am especially indebted to the students at Occidental College who participated in the course Race and its Discontents during the fall of 2010.

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