

## BORDER CROSSINGS: WHO HAS A VOICE?

As to the neighborhood tours.... Some of us are uncomfortable crossing borders even in theory, much less in actuality. Some of us cite the “poverty as spectacle” argument. Some of us maintain that intentions matter, and that first-hand knowledge is better than second-hand knowledge—which, nonetheless, depends on someone *else’s* first-hand knowledge.... You will learn from this discomfort, but you might not learn what you think you will learn, or wish to learn, or have already decided to believe or learn.

Every semester, with a predictability that is...well, predictable, a moment comes when a certain issue finally gets verbalized, and it is then that one particular learning experience can start to take on some depth and complexity. The fact that this moment occurs with such predictability is not to diminish its significance; rather, it speaks well to the students’ developing sensitivity—as long as they don’t get stuck there.

Indeed, it has been the rare semester when this conversation did *not* come up, and I always wondered then why it didn’t. Occasionally, if it looked like no one else would ever bring it up, I would do so myself. Recently, I have decided to bring it up myself at the beginning of the course: hence, what you are reading.

The moment usually surfaces around the time of the Ville tour, interestingly enough, and the phrase that also comes up with great predictability is “like they’re in a zoo.” I have used the phrase myself as a warning to inappropriate behavior, which is an issue unto itself. But the phrase can also be used so broadly as to call into question the whole idea of venturing outside of one’s prescribed box and comfort zone. Touring a neighborhood is a fact; “like they’re in a zoo” is an interpretation, and a very particular one.

I’ll start with some very prosaic information. Being in a bus is, of course, rarely preferable to walking, for a host of reasons, but it is occasionally necessary. We walk when we can, but now and then--due to distances, time, weather, someone twisting an ankle, blocked routes, last minute decisions to add or subtract something from the tour—we take a bus. Sometimes we will even add something to the bus tour at the suggestion of the bus driver. The only really consistent thing about any given tour is that it is never the same twice.

We cannot, in any event, be invisible, so then the question becomes: Where does one draw the line? At a big bus? At a small bus? At any bus at all? At being there at all? These are questions to which people give very different answers.

An interesting fact worth thinking about: many if not most of the bus drivers live in the areas we tour. One of the bus drivers lives just a block from the Shelley house near the Ville. They know the areas well, are helpful and informative and often amazed that we care enough to be there, and anxious to point out things we might not know about.

An anecdote: in 2006, we spoke with the people living next door to the Shelley house. Another man and his father who lived across the street from the Shelly House also came out on their porch, greeted the students, told them about the neighborhood, thanked them profusely for being there, said it was so important that people like you come to their neighborhood and learn about it. They were like a welcome wagon to greet the students.

It is also worth looking at which neighborhoods trigger this “zoo” response in students. Is it in an area I am personally familiar with but the students are not? Is it one they can or cannot identify with? Is it one they themselves feel comfortable or uncomfortable in? Is it downtown? The projects? Lafayette Square? Soulard? The Ville? The Hill?

(Another anecdote: once, in the projects, outside the studio, a young man new to the projects told me to go back where I belong; a mother came out and told him I’d been there almost as long as he’d been alive and belonged there more than he did. Was she right?)

A question: do we tend to give more weight to the positive reactions we get from community members, or to the negative ones? Should we treat them equally? Should we listen to one more than another? Is a young boy shooting fireworks at us (and whose mother might well have brained him for it) to be more listened to more than a couple who waves to us from the porch and speaks to us, or a man who comes up to offer any assistance he can?

The fact is there is not and never has been and probably never will be a monolithic response from either the students or the community members. So...who has a voice?

It is also a fact that most of these neighborhoods, and the people in them, have dealt with much more serious issues than a school bus driving through them. Many of the neighborhoods are plagued by problems that would send—and have sent—weaker people fleeing for the farthest suburbs. The people are quite resilient enough to deal with a school bus and some students. In addition, many of these neighborhoods are “historic” enough that busses go through there quite frequently. For some people, we might even provide a bit of a diversion.

Over the years we have been laughed with and at, approached and avoided, invited back and yelled at to go back where we belong; we have been invited into people’s homes and businesses, shown around their gardens, given the high-five and the peace sign, stared at, sniffed at for being on a “field trip,” asked if we were there to buy their homes, asked if we could put a building on a vacant lot. People have joined our tour to tell us things we did not know and learn things they did not know. We have been stopped by police and drug dealers, prostitutes and gardeners, children and seniors who were grateful that anyone even knew or cared enough about their neighborhood to come there.

It is worth noting that most of the negative reactions have occurred at a distance, from across a street or from the “armor” of a speeding car; as people get physically closer to one another, the interactions become much more thoughtful and positive.

*So: do we stay because some people treated us with openness and welcoming?*

*Do we leave because someone else made it clear they resented us being there?*

*Or do we make up our own minds? We can’t both stay **and** leave....*

One reaction to discomfort is to withdraw from the thing that makes you uncomfortable, in which case we might be left in inaction—that is, these terribly inequitable situations stay that way. So is it our sensitivity to other people or our discomfort that we are ultimately talking about here? Or are we projecting something about ourselves onto other people? Are we, in an ironic sense, “blaming the victim” for our own discomfort and removing ourselves from an opportunity to learn or even do something beneficial?

More basically, if things are so clearly not monolithic, if your voice is only one of many, if you have this many conflicting voices, who do you listen to, and *why*? What happens if you let the most positive voices influence your decisions? What happens if you let the most negative ones influence your decisions?

I would like to quote from a note a recent student sent me regarding this issue:

*I just wanted to send a quick thank you.... Probably what I appreciated most...was your willingness to...ask hard questions. I just wanted to let you know that I'm glad seminar and our neighborhood tours were often really uncomfortable for me. There were lots of times when I needed to be challenged in my opinions, needed someone to push me to back-up what I was saying with evidence, needed to be needled into being that much more honest and frank, rather than hiding behind what I thought I was supposed to say. I especially noticed this on our final wrap-up day, when I said that I would never have actually gone into a neighborhood like Wellston to talk to people.... After I implied that it would be too awkward and invasive on my part, you said that a lot of times when we ourselves are scared to go somewhere or scared of people, we "flip it"--that is, we rationalize our own fear by saying that we would only make other people, the ones we fear, uncomfortable. You were so right! I was afraid to say it, because I thought it might sound classist or racist or just plain ignorant, but the truth is, I would never have gone to a neighborhood like Wellston because I would be downright scared to go. I wouldn't try to talk to strangers on the street there primarily because I would be terrified of how they might react to my intrusion, and only secondarily because I might feel bad about intruding.*

So...whose discomfort, really, are we talking about here?

Perhaps, indeed, it is a zoo, and we are all in it.

*Who has a voice?*

