

Lost in Representation

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When I was a young child, I was not conscious of the difference that set me apart from other kids my age. I was a normal kid; I liked to ride my pink, two-wheeled bike around my neighborhood and chase the ice cream truck barefoot through my neighbors' lawns. I had dreams of owning a puppy and creating a lucrative business out of lemonade stands. I never thought I was different. I didn't deserve to be different. I had two best friends in first grade—Camille and Emma. Camille, with her braided pigtails and wide smile, lived in a bad neighborhood on the bad side of the river, where many of Milwaukee's black families resided. Fearless and playful she was, but care-free she would never be as an endless supply of street smarts and suspicion kept her on guard. I saw myself in her eyes. Emma was the white girl who lived across the street and would emerge only if there was a promise of a soccer game. Open and fun-loving she was, but intimate she could never be as her mother forbade her to play inside my house; in fact, she insisted that Emma and I play in my front yard so that her parents could peer at us from behind the glass of their front windows. I saw myself in her eyes.

James McBride, Barack Obama and many others have attempted to define or portray the experience of someone born into an interracial family. "There is no shame in it," they want to say. "You bi-racial babies are the new frontier, the product of a revolution. Go forth and multiply," they want to say. But they know as well as I do the unfathomable tragedy of being born into an identity crisis and the pain that comes with wanting to be one or the other while remaining stuck in an annoyingly eclectic combination, like an uh-oh Oreo. I'm not black, I'm not white, and hell no I'm not Mexican, Puerto Rican, Greek, Indian, or Native American. I am simply Betsy. Is that enough? Perhaps another story would help.

Once upon a time, Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan were interested in the diversity of Queens, New York. After months of observation and interviews with the people in their neighborhood, they created an exhibit about their findings and titled it *Crossing the Boulevard: Strangers, Neighbors, and*

Aliens in a New America. They took a series of photos of their interviewees and copied down the story each subject chose to relate to them. Next, they mounted their pieces in a gallery tucked away on the Queens College campus, with the statement “free and open to the public” attached to it. On these walls, the citizens of the world come together to represent the cultural melting pot that is Queens, and they all live happily ever after. I was instantly engaged, intrigued, and aroused by this piece. What a perfect site for a diversity-seeking, ethnically confused, black-white, white-black girl to go. The promise of finding solidarity offered by this project seduced me, and I gave in to the temptress of discovery in Queens.

The hidden crevices of Queens were brought to life in the exhibit. For a moment, I was that kid on the pink super bike again, and then I realized I WAS THE ONLY ONE THERE! I wanted to meet these people. Something in my bones told me that here is where the disconnect ends and the identity crisis is resolved. I identified with these people, these “new immigrants,” because they are me. Beautiful images: Chinese women in soft colored robes that seem weightless in their moment of captured suspension, trailing the body turning in a religious dance; a young Bodhisattva dances for his Buddhist beliefs in full makeup and a red robe with necklaces and beads that add a surprising amount of weight and authority to his appearance—he stands in contrast to himself, photographed again in typical American garb appropriate for a man in his early twenties; an older woman from the city of Kabul hides her face behind the delicately patterned cloth, her eyes pained and full of apprehension, and yet, in another photograph, she removes her cloth with the gentle guidance of her daughter and generously shares with the viewers her beauty. I wanted to meet all of them! For a moment, I felt utterly speechless and impressed by Sloan and Lehrer’s work. These people had hidden themselves carefully in their respective neighborhoods, tried to appear inconspicuous, but how lovely that they had agreed to share themselves here. People we may not have known otherwise, perhaps even people we’ve passed on the street and ignored, introduce themselves to us and become our friends as we tour the exhibit. A group of acquaintances composed of Moustafa the Egyptian café owner, Sushil the Hindu monk, Marta the Romanian music professor and Betsy the college student seemed like a feasible idea as I briefly mined this treasure chest of amazing American stories. However, as I passed the walls that separated Queens College from Queens and Queens from the rest of the world, I began to wonder why something that was meant to celebrate diversity had been sequestered behind so many walls, had been separated from the very city that gave it life. Despite the

beauty of the photographs and the intimacy of the stories, *Crossing the Boulevard* portrays its subjects as parts or evidence of a collective story about the new immigrants in Queens rather than as individuals in their own right. I had hoped to find someone who would allow me to be a part of their story, of their work, and I was saddened when I could not find any hint of familiarity in the faces hung so neatly on a wall.

Society has a funny way of looking at people who are different. If society is not preaching intolerance to second grade girls, it's speaking on behalf of us. As if Judith Sloan and Warren Lehrer could speak to the immigrant experience, having lived in America all their lives. As if Barack Obama could even begin to fathom the insecurities that come with being a bi-racial girl: Am I pretty enough? To whom am I pretty? Am I too big? Am I too small? Too dark? Too light? As if Ahearn could know.

Poor, poor John Ahearn. Architect/essayist Miwon Kwon examines his blunder and blaspheming in her essay "Sittings of Public Art: Integration Versus Intervention." He is only Ahearn from the block, from the Bronx, wanting to keep it real. In the magical borough of the Bronx, Ahearn created a statue dedicated to the people of his neighborhood. The statue portrayed a black teenaged girl named Daleesha, a black man named Corey, and a Puerto Rican man named Raymond; each figure performed an activity that Ahearn had seen them perform before. However, the minority communities of the Bronx decided that "Ahearn, as a white man, could never understand the experience of the African American community. Thus he had no capacity to represent it accurately for the Bronx" (Kwon 418). Why should a white man be given the authority to represent a minority, given his social superiority and power over them? Should Ahearn have this power over their representation? Should Sloan? Should Obama? While Ahearn might have insight into the plight of Bronx minorities, he himself is not a minority and therefore cannot ever truly understand their particular struggle.

Despite the rationality behind the argument against Ahearn, can we really take his artistic vision away from him because we are irritated by his interpretation? Ahearn's experience of the Bronx is on display and exposed in his statue. We see Daleesha, Raymond, and Corey, yet the features of Ahearn himself are alive within the appearances of his subjects. Perhaps Ahearn played with some of these people, borrowed flour from one of these people, shared a beer with one of these people. Ahearn tells his story through the representation of others, and his point of view offers a richness that other inhabitants of his neighborhood may not have seen before.

Where could I find the audacity to broadcast my point of view to the public? I thought the photographs would tell me. I wanted to be a part of their story so that I could connect with those who share my existence—an existence that so often tears me in half and asks me to pick one side or the other. I slowly began to understand that I could not identify with these faces on the wall, but in my struggle to connect, I found myself face-to-face with the authors of the piece.

I returned to the site, drawn like an annoying mosquito to the light as I lost my way a second time. The young man at the front desk glared at me as I entered and ruined his chances of ducking out of work early. “The exhibit continues upstairs,” he groaned. As I made my way upstairs, I stumbled across a corner I had managed to overlook during my first visit. A pair of headphones rested on a speaker box and a play button gleamed and tempted in the fluorescent light. Of course I pressed *Play!* Voices, many in languages I could not recognize, began to sound, and I was overwhelmed by a feeling of joy and warmth. I heard high school children playing a variety of theater games. After a while, a singular voice spoke first in Hungarian, then in English; the voice belonged to 18-year-old Anton, and he explained, in English, the fable he had just told in his native language. Once again I found myself moved and impressed by Sloan’s ability to capture something as intimate as the journey between two different languages. It was in that moment of admiration that I realized that perhaps the representation offered by Sloan and Lehrer was not an incorrect one. Listening to Anton’s voice, I heard some of my own tendencies toward maturity and sensed a familiar need to assert oneself as an adult. I heard so much of myself in that young boy’s voice, despite the fact that I could only reach him and experience his story through the auspices of a third party. New York is often a lonely, frightening place, yet in that small corner of the gallery, I felt as if I connected not only with Anton but also with Judith Sloan and Warren Lehrer. I finally understood what they were hoping to accomplish. They did not claim to be experts on these people’s lives, yet they tried so hard to bring these people to life through their own powers of storytelling. It was Sloan and Lehrer’s story I saw and listened to, and it was their experience with these people (their interaction with these people) that composed their story.

Somehow, during my third visit to the exhibit, I became convinced that the people of Queens hated me. After emerging from the subway like a frightened bunny from under the bed, I stepped on a woman’s toes and became the victim of a string of obscenities aimed at me in an unknown language. I stopped to ask for directions, and a group of Latino men argued over the best

way to get to Queens College. African-American mothers walked beside Hasidic Jewish mothers, pushing strollers and shoving me to the curb where I tipped dangerously backward towards the busy street. According to Lehrer and Sloan's book, "Queens is home to both Kennedy and LaGuardia airports—the Ellis Island of the *new* new century. Got \$5 in your pocket, where do you go? The next block" (17). So there I was, dropped in the middle of a place still so foreign, among people who might have been spending their first afternoon in America; people fresh off the plane looking to use their five dollars where they could; people taking their first steps on gritty, American concrete. Here lies my fascination with Queens, with Sloan and Lehrer's exhibit, and with New York City—I had finally found a place that was as mixed up and confused as I am.

Storytelling through art often leaves people feeling violated and angry that an artist would broadcast another's story, thus claiming it (the story, the subject, the art) as the artist's own. Perhaps it is unfair. Why manipulate someone's history when they cannot give life to that history on their own? However, was Ahearn trying to tell the story of Daleesha and *her* survival of the streets, or should we instead read his piece as an expression of his own experience? The statue tells the story of John Ahearn and how he relates to his friends and neighbors. I have never seen the piece, but I can imagine the amount of love etched into the statues; I imagine that these loving etchings resemble the love I saw in the eyes of *Boulevard's* subjects as they reflected the gaze of two people fascinated by their stories and dedicated to the accurate re-telling of them.

I started walking the few miles back to the subway station, still slightly wet from the earlier downpour and dreading the trip back to Manhattan. I had ridden the R train to the end of the line and felt as though I had discovered a corner of the world that no one else had. I had left the familiarity of my dorm room and my neighborhood to embark on a search for self, hoping, in the process, to find people who would share my journey with me. As the subway began its long trek from Forest Hills back to Union Square, I became intrigued by a young Hispanic family sitting opposite me. The mother held a large white box that contained some sort of exercise device; the father gazed curiously at the advertisements on the subway car, apparently savoring every detail. Two small children clung to their parents as they sucked on push-up pops, their lips stained green and red. The little boy, about two years old, rolled from one parent's lap to the other's with puppy-like enthusiasm, giggling loudly as his mother attempted to regain control. The little girl, who looked about six, ignored her brother and continued to devour her candy. In

that moment, I felt connected to each of them. Each felt safe and secure within the family, yet they were all autonomous people, absorbed in their own activities. How beautiful and simple! Yet despite my attachment to this particular family and their story, I cannot pretend that by putting my observations to paper, I am telling the story of the handsome Hispanic family and not the story of Betsy observing the handsome Hispanic family. As soon as I share this story with someone else, from my perspective and in my words, it becomes my story, and therefore a mere representation of the family on the subway. Perhaps this is what art is meant to be. Through its representation of people or objects, it becomes its own story and achieves its own independence. Perhaps the original story only becomes richer when we add more layers, more perspectives, more chapters.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* features Martin Sheen as a soldier who must hunt down and terminate a renegade officer named Kurtz. As Sheen's character prepares the audience for its journey with him into the wilderness and peril of war-ridden Vietnam and Cambodia, he reminds us that "there is no way to tell his [Kurtz's] story without really telling my own" (Coppola). I cannot tell the story of Judith Sloan, her husband Warren Lehrer, and their journey into the heart of Queens without telling my own, which is ultimately a story of self discovery.

I thought I had begun my quest in search of the true stories of Anton, Moustafa, Bovic, and the other immigrants represented in Lehrer and Sloan's piece, but I eventually realized that I cannot know their entire histories. I can, however, relate my own story, talk about my interaction with this piece, and in doing so, break through feelings of powerlessness and encourage others to contribute, to bring their point of view to what I've seen and told. We must let others in if we desire to create pieces that are free and open to the public. We create art, write our histories, and allow everyone to observe and leave their mark on them, just as they leave their stamp on the observers.

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