On Shattering Silences

JILL BAMBURY
University of Oregon

The Museum is an old plantation estate which has been taken over and proudly cared for by the University. It contains some fine old buildings. Architecture students are often taken there to study their spatial configurations and wood joinery. When the University took it over, a new building was built near the entrance of the site for the purpose of housing conferences, receptions, and retreats. Outside of the new building is a modem larger than life size statue of a "negro" man with a pick and ax. One day, when looking at the statue, we noticed a piece of plywood which had been tacked on to cover part of its base. We removed the plywood to reveal a plaque. The inscription read "To the Darkies, who Built this Land" .

PREFACE

This paper will risk political incorrectness in favour of breaking a silence because it is concerned with uncovering the truth. With the exception of the preface, this paper will also deliberately defy most rules of academic argument and favour, instead, the power of narrative, of story-telling. I have chosen not to argue my position, but will simply tell the tale, allowing the listener (if he or she chooses) to distinguish between the truth and "wives tales" or "hearsay". My format is an act of resistance, but also an act of confirmation of a tradition of story-telling. It is grounded both in the way that women have traditionally told their stories and in an "nigra/nigger/colored/negro/black/African American" way of disseminating information.

"Sorting out" issues of gender, race, and cultural difference in the field of Architecture has become crucial as our students become increasingly aware of cultural politics in everyday life. There is a lot of work to be done on issues of gender, but its boundaries are fairly clear. It is the issues of race which concern me more, here, as they interface with architectural problems. For black people, (and I've talked to quite a few in many walks of life) race issues permeate everything.

Already allowing my writing to fall into the category of "personal narrative" or "storytelling", I have to tell you that the "race issues" with which I am dealing are very specific. They do not dare to border on the problems of Asians or Latin Americans living in North America, let alone racial problems in other parts of the world. My issues are specifically about black people and white people in south Louisiana, where the population is more than forty per cent black. I taught there for five years and the experience haunts me. When I entered my classroom for the first time, I was shocked to find not one black face among the students. It was only after inquiring about the reasons, that I understood the truth; there were two schools of architecture in that city; one of which is an accredited school in a "historically black" college. The two schools had little to do with each other. They didn't talk. Silence reigned.

For this fact, I discovered that there were several reasons. One reason is that the "historically black" university has its own agenda which is strongly based on preserving and amplifying African American culture and values. This is related to the reality that, currently and historically, the black community and the white community are two separate entities. Another reason is harder to digest, but simple. Architects are not often seen as heroes in the African American community.

I know that at one architecture school in the South, serious attempts had been made to attract African American students to the program. When the recruiter visited some predominantly black high schools, he found that there was little interest and, rather, serious resentment from the students about the possibility of studying architecture at a predominantly white institution. Why would they want to? Potential earning power is low for architects, and besides, most schools of architecture are more engaged in the business of propagating the status quo than in challenging it. Very few American schools of Architecture have an agenda by which to define themselves. Even less have a localized vision and a direction. Given these facts, which were understood, at least implicitly, even by high school students, the prospect of a black American attending a white school of Architecture was probably anathema.

I believe that there were also other issues.

Before the end of Apartheid, I remember listening to a radio series by a white reporter from South Africa who had come to America to make a documentary on black/white relations in the United States. That which struck him most strongly was the inability of Americans, both black and white to discuss race and racism. No one wanted to talk about it.

It is with the important purpose of breaking this silence that I nervously write. Let me begin this invasion of silence by remarlung simply and truthfully about the statue at the Rural Life Museum. The truth is that black people built the South. The truth is also that this fact is largely ignored. Like the plaque on the statue, it is covered up. It is covered up because, for white people, it is an embarrassing fact.

This paper is based on personal experience which I have gleaned from living in the South, where I became immersed in its culture(s) and also in some of its problems. Neither my background, nor my research allows me to delve into the long-standing history of such problems. For the moment, I can only attempt to expose the gestalt of the issues which trouble me. Writing can be therapeutic and listening to a story can be spellbinding. But, I preface my tale with the hope that this story will inspire someone who is similarly puzzled by race problems in our field to begin to speak about them. I know that it will, at least, break the silence.

EXPLORING RACIAL BOUNDARIES IN THE SOUTH

An Essay on Silence

It may be true that talk is cheap and dulls the senses, or that actions speak louder than words, but tell me, what happens when we have been silent for so long that we lose the language to talk about things which are so basic to our lives that we act upon them everyday?

The whole situation makes me angry ... but you know how anger is. You let it out and it gets totally misconstrued ... you say the wrong thing and it invokes anger in everyone else. It makes everyone say things they wish they hadn't said.

If I lived in California, maybe things would be easier. I'd have a shrink. I'd let it all out, without having to weigh each thought, each sentence spoken. Maybe it would be fine to be a Californian and have a shrink-come-confidante instead of living in the Deep South, where silences of all sorts reign.

The truth is that even Californians have problems with this one. Actions speak louder than words, especially when the language is lost. Look at the LA.. riots. And think about what I said about anger. It's let out and it gets totally misconstrued. It invokes anger in everyone else until nobody knows what they're doing and everyone just wishes it hadn't happened. The riots hurt Los Angeles. Buildings were gutted and burned. People were afraid to leave their homes. Cultural and territorial lines were even more heavily guarded, both physically and figuratively.

Actions may scream, but silence is more treacherous. Like camouflage, silence is a powerful hidden weapon.

When I first moved to the South, I didn't really know much about the power of camouflage, or of silence. It seemed that everywhere I went, I got into a screaming battle. I had no enemies because I had no weapons. My opinion was simply dismissed as being naive and inexperienced.

"What do you mean you shop on that street? That's dangerous, girl!", the natives would say. The street runs north from the center of the city to the chemical plant, a plant which employs thousands of people, while, at the same time spewing pollution into the surrounding neighbourhoods, in the north end of town, where the black people live. (For a long time, the street was a major shopping strip. Now it is a bit of an urban ruin, plagued by pawn shops and prostitutes. It also houses the best produce and fish markets in town.)

The windows of my friend's car would roll up and the automatic door locks would click down when we drove through those neighbourhoods. "I wouldn't normally drive down here", my friend would say. "It's 'a neighbourhood'. But, it's just a little bit faster. Less traffic."

Similarly, from my real estate agent "You can buy a house on this side of the Boulevard, but, (and I'm not supposed to say this), the other side is 'a neighbourhood'". It is ironic that the term 'neighbourhood', one favoured by architects, landscape architects and community planners as a word denoting a sense of community has been adopted by real estate agents and white inhabitants of this city to mean "pockets of the city where black people live". Although some may be infested with drug problems and violence, "the neighbourhoods" are neighbourhoods. You can tell when you enter them. Families sit on porches. Children ride bicycles in the streets. People walk on the sidewalks. Unlike the other side of the Boulevard, a beautiful old suburb, where I did buy my house, the 'neighbourhoods' have life.

At the interface of my suburb and the "nieghbourhoods" was a gracious old park, home to a public golf course and an art gallery. In the center of the park was an empty concrete hole which had been an elegant old swimming pool. I've been told that the pool officially closed, never to reopen, a short time after it had been legislated to allow black people to use the facilities. The park also had a tennis courts where our team played. The place was such a contrast to the private clubs that we had toyed with the idea of calling ourselves the "Urban League".

My partner Helen was the only black woman in our tennis league. She is noticeable due to this fact. When we went to the one club which is notorious both for its exclusively Caucasian membership and its "ninety per cent white" dress code, we would hide our embarrassment by joking with our hostesses. "We're observing your ninety per cent white rule! We've only brought one black woman!" With Helen, I could talk about race. She is the first black person I managed to befriend. It took me two years. And even though we were often stared at when we went out for a meal together, by blacks and whites of both sexes, we still did it. We spoke quietly, but we broke the silence.

Quiet talk is soothing and much better than silence, but

sometimes it doesn't work. With the blatant racists, I wanted to scream. I'd be having a conversation with someone at the tennis court and they'd let something slip out, not realizing that I was in camouflage. "So, I hear you've been havin' problems with the niggers up north, too."

I was in shock. Helen was used to it.

Harder to deal with, were the more subtle offenders. Couched in "Southern tradition" as well as first-hand experience, they were usually silent or sometimes polite about issues of race. Many of my white fnends in the South were brought up by black women, who they truly hold dear in their hearts. "I was raised by a black woman and Miss Ruby is like part of our family." It confounds me that I've never met any of their "nannies", although I know the rest of their family members.

The tradition of "black nannies" continues in the South, and brings with it a puzzling paradox. My quiet little street on the "right side" of the Boulevard had a slew of professionals with a slew of babies. With them came a slew of nannies. The "nannies" formed a network. They would meet in the mornings, babies in tow and walk together. I would wake up in the mornings and hear them singing spirituals on the front porch of my neighbour's house. I would come out my door and Miss Ella would be sitting on the porch swing, baby on her lap, talking to her friend on the cordless telephone.

The "nannies" brought with them a sense of "neighbourhood" which was layered on top of the life of our old and gracious suburb. They brought life from another community, another world. They knew the mailman and the garbage man, the gardeners, and all of the bus drivers. Through their network, I came to know neighbourhood children whose parents I had never set eyes on.

I've been told, "Riots like are happening in Los Angeles could never happen here. We've always lived side by side with the blacks. It's an integrated society."

But, it's not. When the day was over, the nannies and the gardeners disappeared and went home on the bus to their houses which had no phones on streets I might only have seen from an automobile with windows rolled up and automatic door locks clicked down.

I've talked to my black friend Mr. Cesar about these issues. He's fascinating character. He had a woman's first name. His father died when his sweet mother was pregnant with him and I suppose that she had given him the name which they had chosen for their much prayed for daughter. His bond with his mother, forged by the circumstances and timing of his father's death, was solid, even now, five years after her "passing". A conversation with Cesar is never held without mention of her strength and wisdom. Her picture is framed on his office desk. Through his tireless and various anecdotes of her, she has become a heroine for everyone who knows him. He is like she was, a tough, sweet, wise angel, whose credo it is to always tell the truth.

Cesar's mother did not want him to study architecture. She associated architects with bad news; architects were white men of power who came always with bad tidings about things over which you had no control. Her home in the north end of the city had been expropriated, "bought off' by the government when they decided to build the new airport. The architects were people who brought in to explain why it was crucial that the airport be located where it was and to show her the new houses they were designing. She disapproved of Cesar's career choice even when Cesar tried desperately to convince her that this was a way to battle the inequities.

Cesar had studied at the historically black college I told you about. His education was much different from mine. The issues were different. His education had been somewhat focused on political issues, but he had also become fascinated with the great buildings of Egypt. (This fact itself is riddled with complexity.) Cesar was the chair of the local housing authority. He had a clientele unequaled by any white architect in the city. His clients ranged from the president of the university to the latest co-op housing group. Most of them were black. Cesar is a "black architect" in a "black community".

Because we were interested in the same issues, and in speaking the truth, my friend Cesar and I broke the sound barrier. Our truthful conversations over the years have confirmed my suspicions that black people and white people in the South speak two different dialects of the same language. Although this statement may be literally true, I also use the term "dialect" to refer metaphorically to culture.

Anyone who speaks a dialect will confirm that there are certain words which overlap from one dialect to the next, but that there are other words and meanings which are completely different. In Chinese dialects, words which often share the same written character are pronounced entirely differently. Dialects are directly related to cultural identity; both cultural pride and cultural ridicule. In New Brunswick, the only officially bilingual province in Canada, I learned French as a child, from European teachers. I was shocked that I could not proudly use it when I moved to Montreal. In Quebec, my French was immediately identifiable as "textbook French". The Quebecois speak a dialect which (although it is ridiculed in Paris) is a source of identity and cultural pride. It is a complex issue.

The poet Maya Angelou says that African Americans are bilingual ... that they speak a secret language, one forged during times of slavery and one which persists. I can confirm it. I have listened to conversations in English among African American friends and literally, not understood a single sentence. This schism in understanding is another metaphor for culture.

Cesar and I have struggled in long and tortured conversations about all of these issues, but we were not afraid to speak. Maybe talk is cheap and dulls the senses. Maybe actions speak louder than words. Maybe we have been silent for so long that the language is being lost. Still, *nothing* can be said of silence.

I'll tell you about just one more episode of speaking, of a conversation between myself and Keon, a child who also was not afraid to speak. Initially, children have an amazing

capacity for language and also for trust. It is only once they begin to be 'socialized' that things change. For me, this single fact is bewildering proof that the world could be a much better place. Keon is ten years old. He stands at a critical juncture between innocence and knowledge, between spealung and silence, between black and white.

I met him when I took my car for service at dealership. The service waiting room is in the bowels of the building, where you wait interminably with the television droning and stale popcorn, tactics used to prevent the customers from complaining to each other. The whole thing is laid out to prevent a revolution.

This waiting room was occupied by seven people. No other children. Keon was obviously bored. When I first arrived he was sitting on the floor just outside the waiting area. After I had poured some coffee, a timed delay to let me decide where to sit, he had returned to his original position beside his aunt and I sat next to him.

The conversation I had with that child was louder than the television. His aunt heard it all. And every once in a while, other heads were lifted and eyes turned probably just to see the expressions on our faces.

"So, what have you been doing all summer? Are you ready for school?' (as if I had always known him).

"Hanging out at the Y. Playing basketball, and making things". His counselor was assistant director of programs, he proudly told me.

"Lucky you! He must have been good."

"He was tough", I was told.

I had already guessed that Keonplayed basketball. A look at his feet was all that was required. Foamy hightops in black and white. Size eight.

I could also tell that he liked making things. In the course of a half hour he produced from his pockets a pencil, three markers, several pieces of paper, and two lengths of wire from which he constructed a structure.

I told him that I went to classes at the Y. "Mr. Kindred is in my aerobics class." (a glance from his aunt). As coach of the basketball ball team at the historically black university, Mr. Kindred is known by every black child in the city. He is anonymous in the white community.

Keon and I talked about football and basketball. He named every opponent that the "dream team" had played in the Olympics. I was sure that Keon dreamed about being one of them. Many black children want to be great athletes or musicians when they "grow up". (I know because we talk.) But, their parents have problems with this. Whether blatant or subtle, white repression of black success is often only released when black people wish to become "entertainers" and "gladiators" to the delight of the white spectator.

But Keon surprised me.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked him.

"A ***black*** judge ... or a ***black*** architect ... or maybe a ***black*** film maker like Spike Lee!". I am still not sure whether it was young pride or old prejudice which made Keon think of himself in his adult life as being black first, and an architect (or a judge or film maker) second. Nevertheless, I was impressed. Remember, this is a ten year old speaking, not some pre-professional under grad. I told him that I was an architect.

"Where do you want to go to school?"

"I don't know.", he said. But, he named the two schools in my city. I told him that I thought he should go to the historically black school. I did not tell him the reasons why. It was too long a story. Silence was easier.

"Hey, next summer is gonna' be great? I'm gonna' get my ear pierced so I can have a diamond earring. ***And,*** I'm gonna' get a flat top ... can't stand this Ivy league haircut. And, I'm going to St. Thomas next summer with my dad. He's from here, but he's traveled all over the world. My dad is a Muslim, like Malcolm X. I have a Malcolm X tee-shirt."

Keon told me where I could get a Malcolm X tee-shirt and African dresses. I asked him how he thought I would look in a Malcolm X tee-shirt, or an African dress. He looked at me, confused. I was speaking another dialect. No response. A glance from his aunt.

We talked about music. He sang some rap lines from De la Soul (ironically a rap group comprised of architecture students from Pratt) with the whole room as audience, but told me he also liked jazz and blues. He named all of his favourite artists, many of which I had never heard tell. We exchanged our views on the local radio stations. His aunt maintained her silence.

"***She*** mostly listens to the gospel station", he said.

Finally, Keon's aunt's car was ready. It was a Camry, just like mine. "Ice-cube blue", he had told me. "Ice blue", she corrected him. In the course of almost an hour, this was the only time she spoke.

CONCLUSION

On Speaking the Truth

> "Riots like are happening in Los Angeles could never happen here. We've always lived side by side with the blacks. It's an integrated society."
>
> (voice of a white woman from New Orleans).

The truth of the situation in the South, where in some cities the number of blacks is equal or is greater than the numbers of whites is that the world is not integrated. African Americans work side by side with white people but live in different worlds. Some have no choice. Others wouldn't have it any other way. You see, different dialects are spoken. The cultures are different.

As in many American cities, for many reasons, the older center of the city where I lived is a business district which becomes an empty silent shell at night, or maybe an echo chamber. The best of its immediately surrounding housing stock has been purchased for use as private offices. The worst of the housing stock has become "black neighbourhoods".

After the malls were built and the center began to decline, middle class blacks and whites built their own suburbs in the outskirts, most of which are almost exclu-

sively segregated. For many, both black and white, this was a matter of choice, not necessity. A large percentage of African Americans live close to the "historically black" university, which was built early in the century. They also live close to the airport, the major throughways, and the chemical plant, all of which were built after the black neighbourhoods were well established. Most of the white suburbs are at the other end of town.

The area where I bought my house, the Garden District, on the east side of the Boulevard, with its park and tennis courts, is an anomaly; a splendid old suburb literally surrounded by "neighbourhoods". All of the houses are old and many are big, beautiful and expensive. The Garden District maintains its exclusively white population because of the unspoken rule that "Blacks are not allowed". This silent rule, although not legal, and never explicitly talked about, is reinforced by real estate agents and a privately hired police force which patrols the area. An African American friend told me that his son was chased from my street by police for riding his bicycle through the area. His integrated school is just outside of the Garden District, which itself contains two private schools.

The integration of the school system in the late sixties, despite good intentions, caused huge rifts in local communities through its decentralizing effects. My friends, both black and white, complain of the fact that their children travel on buses for miles when schools exist within their own neighbourhoods. Tonya and George, both teachers who live in a black neighbourhood, send their two children to a Catholic private school because otherwise, the demographic racial integration of schools would have each child traveling to a different school on a different bus, both miles from home. I know it was a difficult decision. The only chance their children will have to reaffirm their cultural values and racial pride will come when they choose a college. Historically black universities, despite pressure from outside, maintain their stronghold in this area.

When he entered college, Cesar's choice was to turn down scholarships to Ivy League universities. Having attended "white schools" for all of his life, Cesar made the right decision. He thrived on a university education which reinforced his valuable cultural upbringing. Cesar, in spite of his own success, believes that the destiny of a black child growing up in this country is limited. As much as I would like to prove him wrong, I have seen and heard enough to believe that this is true also.

Keon, when he grows up, may, like Cesar, become "a black architect". Ironically, Keon learned about the profession when he saw Spike Lee's film ***Jungle Fever.*** For anyone who has never dealt with racial problems, the issues exposed in the film may have seemed overstated and melodramatic. In ***Jungle Fever,*** a black architect leaves his family when he falls in love with a white temporary cleric who comes to work in his firm. In the process, the hero also loses his job. Lee's film was criticized by feminists for its conscious representation of the female protagonist as an uneducated woman. It must also have been Lee's conscious decision to present the black male protagonist in a powerful position as a potential principal in an architectural firm. Many recent films ***(Sleepless in Seattle*** or ***Indecent Proposal,*** for example) have featured architects as heroes. However, in ***Jungle Fever,*** like in all real tragedies, the hero eventually falls.

It breaks my heart to say it, but, I hope that Keon becomes "a black Judge" instead of "a black architect". In the South, although legally contested, the lines of judicial districts have been rightly redrawn demographically to ensure black representation. In the profession of architecture, there seems to be little utterance about all of the black/white issues it could address, and almost no affirmation of the potential for difference to speak loudly and clearly. An inclusive discipline begins with the practice of everyday language. But, learning a language also requires careful listening. A whisper in the night can go unnoticed by a sound sleeper. A spoken voice need not cause her to awake; it can be easily be assimilated into her own dreams. A scream in the darkness does not shatter the silence of the deaf.