Towards an Urban Arts Democracy:
Conversation Under the Cosmopolitan Canopy

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Penn Program on Democracy, Citizenship, and Constitutionalism
Graduate Workshop
January 29, 2009

Abstract

While "free spaces" may well be a site of democratic change (Evans & Boyte, 1986), what types of discussions happen in such free spaces? How are issues of social difference, particularly that of race, handled in democratic public conversation? Using ethnographic data, this paper explores the "democratic dilemma" of race (Minow, 1990) looking at a series of public conversations about arts, culture, and regional development. This series of public conversations is in many ways a "cosmopolitan canopy" (Anderson, 2004), a place where people can interact civilly across social cleavages—and yet the salience of racial difference to a majority-white group emerges as both a pitfall and a possibility to new ways of understanding diversity and the importance of inclusive and representative public conversation for democratic change.

Introduction

At a moment in history when public conversation and civic engagement are recognized as hallmarks of a robust democracy, questions about the types of conversations—and indeed, how to create a context for conversation across social cleavages[1] of race, class, geographic region, etc.—abound. Polletta and Lee (2006) identify a central paradox of public conversation: personal narrative is valued for its persuasive and humane values even as those who value this type of communication believe that it is not effective at a policy level because of its emotional tenor. Other social critics argue that many attempts at "public conversation" simply serve the interests of elite groups, and that citizen voices are generally left out of the conversations.

Yet for those interested in living in an "unoppressive city" (Young, 1990; Green, 1999), face to face conversation across social difference is a crucial way to move past historical and current oppression, residential and ideological segregation, and other ways that urban spaces can easily fracture along lines of identity. Moreover, face to face conversation—particularly public deliberation, by and for citizens of all social categories—is a hallmark of social change. In the past 50 years, in particular, the "small groups" of the women's movement, the training and organizing groups of the civil rights movement, and various cells and collectives (among other clusters) of the student movement (SDS, SNCC) and of groups like the Black Panthers have shown that

[1] I use the concept of "social cleavage" throughout this paper to draw attention to the ways that different facets of lived experience such as race, class, gender, or geography can serve to divide people who otherwise have much in common. I use the terms "social cleavage" and "difference" somewhat interchangeably here, although the primary cleavage or difference I am concerned with is that of race. The "social" aspect of cleavage or difference is a reminder that while the history and consequences of racism are as real as anything, "race" is a socially constructed concept, not an inherent or "natural" fact.

conversation and collaboration are central to a particular vision of social change (Evans & Boyte, 1986).

But what happens in these groups? If "free spaces" are the site and source of democratic change (Evans & Boyte, 1986), even the most "free" of "free spaces" have been shown to reproduce inequalities along race, gender, and class lines, among other social divisions. Stokely Carmichael's widely-repeated "joke" about the position of women in SNCC ("prone") is one of the more notable examples of this sort of social reproduction of mainstream roles in an ostensibly "free space" of social change. But this tendency for even self-consciously democratic or radical groups to reproduce the status quo in terms of leadership (particularly privileging men over women and white people over people of color in groups that strive to be multiracial or work across gender differences) is a pitfall of nearly all known social change movements or small groups. DuBois' 20th century problem of the color line (1903/1989) bleeds over into this century and reminds us that for "free spaces" and other potential sites of change, the problems of difference and the difference difference makes continue to baffle us and too often stymie progressive possibilities.

In Philadelphia, issues of arts, cities, and social change twine together to provide a glimpse of what one local arts activist has termed an "Urban Arts Democracy" (UAD). This Urban Arts Democracy, a hopeful space, is not unique or limited to this particular city, although this city is a very interesting case study for exploring the relationship of arts, cities and social change. While Philadelphia is not the only city with a vibrant artistic and cultural life, nor is it the only hopeful space in which to experiment with democratic processes, it provides an interesting site to explore the relationship between

cities, arts, and social change. Under that large umbrella of Urban Arts Democracy, I focus more specifically on an emerging aspect of public conversation and the ways in which white people's perceptions of race and racial difference influence conversation. It is Philadelphia's Arts and Cities Enable Sustainabillity project, also known as ACES, that I examine in this paper, looking at the specificities of public conversation around arts and regional development and the ways that race emerges as an ongoing concern for democratic conversation.

Several long-time champions of civic engagement developed ACES as a result of years of organizing other public conversations where area residents continually name arts and culture opportunities as one of the Philadelphia region's strengths. ACES pivots on public conversation with any and all citizens of the larger region; the conversation around arts, culture, and regional development is seen as both a public good in itself and an important piece of collective desires that benefit city and regional planners, policy makers, and elected officials.

In some important ways, the conversation of the ACES project points towards a working vision of Urban Arts Democracy—the idea that this urban space and its arts communities offer distinctly democratic spaces to foment social change. It is some of the public conversation fostered by ACES that I will examine in this paper, with a particular interest in how racial difference emerges as a source of conflict in majority-white ACES forums.

Exploring Anderson's notion of the cosmopolitan canopy—a space which fosters safe and civil public interactions across social difference—provides a useful framework for examining the "work" of ACES (2004). If ACES is itself a cosmopolitan canopy for

discussing the role of arts and culture in regional development, issues of difference and race are both foregrounded and elided in what may be one-time, chosen interactions among ACES forum participants. If an interaction is pleasurable, ACES participants are free to continue their association through their own social networking or to let the interaction remain a one-time experience, and likewise with interactions with others which may be highly unpleasant. There is no long-term commitment to the ACES forum. Participants choose to attend and to participate, or not. These forums are widely advertised in local media, free to attend, and attract participants who choose to be there.

Since these public forums, like the cosmopolitan canopy Anderson describes in Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Marketplace, are in some ways anonymous, race and racial difference take on a few unique qualities. Rather than describing individuals' lived experiences and their connection to their family histories, "race" at ACES forum becomes mostly something which is assumed by participants to be visible. If someone appears to be white, people at the forum assume that is the case. This reliance on visible markers of racial identity is highly problematic, and yet is the working concept that guides much public conversation about race. If a room appears to a forum participant to be full of white people, for example, the participant may find him or herself announcing the lack of "diversity" in the room, or commenting on how the discussion is full of "white people" whether or not that is the case. And this attention to race as a visible identity, to a conflation between diversity and presumed race, is not unique to ACES forums. Rather, it is another layer of the cosmopolitan canopy and the conversations that take place under its shelter.

ACES forums provide a space to attend to what happens under a cosmopolitan canopy: its dictates, limitations, and potential benefits for cities and regions. Ultimately, the cosmopolitan canopy of ACES conversation may inform projects of Urban Arts Democracy as well as more traditional urban and regional development, and ultimately contribute to larger democratic discourse. The how-to of democratic conversation, particularly conversation involving citizens from a variety of social groups, remains an ongoing question; projects like ACES allow us to examine what happens under cosmopolitan canopies and in the name of democratic conversation.

A Note on Methods

Data analyzed in this paper is from ongoing data collection. It is a slice of a larger research project. This data includes participant observation at the art leaders meeting, artist advisory group meetings, other ACES team meetings, and the 14 public ACES forums (field notes and other related documents); general survey data from 169 of 270 forum participants across the region; approximately 12 formal interviews with participants who attended the first round of forums; public documents and other ACES public meeting information. This data has been collected over a period of 11 months and includes over 40 hours of public forum participant-observation, hundreds of hours of ACES process participation, and approximately 30 hours of recorded formal interviews.

In keeping with ethnographic convention, the three major branches of this research are participant-observation, documents, and interviews. These are multiple ways of trying to understand the experience of the ACES forums from the point of view of its organizers and the many participants. Rather than evaluating whether the ACES

project is good or bad, successful or unsuccessful, or whether it is effective, my concern is with how people see the work of the forums and of the larger project. There are multiple points of view here, and I endeavor to document them and look for larger patterns and truths.

I have worked for pay, as a volunteer, as a "research assistant" and "consultant" and played many other roles in the ACES project. Currently the ACES team provides me with office space and an unofficial but collaborative role in this work. While my research interest is in what happens within public conversations that ACES supports and organizes, my research would not be possible without the generosity of the ACES leadership team.

Spelling It Out: Race, Difference, and Conversation

At an early ACES forum in 2008, none of the leadership team was sure what to expect. While the team leaders and many of the moderators had years of experience holding public conversation, the arts and culture focus of this project loomed large on the horizon. Would arts and culture conversations be somehow different to moderate than conversations about local government or municipal budgets? What would the ACES team uncover in these first public forums?

This forum took place in a large lecture hall of a suburban art school, a beautiful space with original art, many windows, and a view of a formal garden in the peak of bloom. The plan for this forum was to pilot the ACES method of public conversation addressing citizen thoughts about arts, culture, and regional development. The methods of conversation were not new to the leadership team nor to the assembled moderators,

trained by the project leaders, although the topic of arts and culture was a departure from the organization's historical focus on budget and governmental issues. The overall plan was to introduce ACES to the assembled group of citizen participants, then break up into groups where moderators would lead investigation into how these particular participants perceived the value of arts and culture in the region.

According to plan, the group of about 50 mostly white, middle class, college educated suburban residents in later middle age broke up into 4 groups, each with an ACES-trained moderator and a note taker also trained as an ACES moderator. In small groups, forum participants gathered in a circle of chairs by an easel with chart paper (for notes); while the note taker recorded notes in forum-approved colors of brown, black, and blue[2], the moderator would move around the circle to facilitate conversation along ACES guidelines, trying to ensure that group participants deliberated rather than debated[3], and above all *listened*[4] to one another.

The group facilitated by Lauren with notes taken by John got off to a typical start: the 10 participants went around the circle to say their names, where they were from, and why they came to the forum that evening. The other groups at this forum were doing the same thing at other spots in the large room. All broke into groups and initiate conversation along the lines of the outline and agenda presented to them by ACES leaders at a recent moderators' training. While Lauren, John, and other moderators and

[2] Red markers, in particular, are to be avoided according to ACES leadership, because of the association of red with danger and with unpleasant school grades and paper comments.
[3] ACES conversations are not meant to be debates or arguments between one faction or another; they are meant to be places where citizens share thoughts about regional opportunities and options and try to learn from different points of view. In this way, ACES forums are very much a space of public learning; the compiled results of these various forums are also used as an instructional guide of sorts for local politicians and policy-makers.
[4] What could be termed *critical listening* is an important component of ACES conversation; forum participants are reminded multiple times to try to listen more than they speak in order to have a particular kind of democratic experience.

note takers in the room certainly had some freedom to guide the discussion according to the experiences in their particular small group as well as their own individual personalities, the overall mission of the small group experience was for facilitators to stimulate brainstorming and discussion among the small group, with the facilitator speaking only to move participants through various scenarios about arts and regional development. The note taker was meant to take notes and post the sheets of notes around the small group's area, recording points of conversation in participants' words as much as possible.

But early in the small group conversation, as talk moved from participant introductions to the uses of arts and culture, the moderator and note taker began to talk with one another in front of the assembled group. John, with a warm smile and a friendly nod as he wrote down various participant comments, paused with marker in hand. He wrote the word "expression" on chart paper spelled with one "s" and caught himself—but before either adding the missing letter or moving on to capture another comment, Lauren looked at the chart paper positioned at the focal point of the circle and said, "Expression is spelled with 2 "s"s." Her tone was friendly and light; John nodded again and added the second "s."

The purpose of the group notes according to the ACES leaders, who outlined the group's work at the begin of the event, was simply to keep track of what was said for the benefit of the group, to share with other groups in the room at the end of the evening, and to use as a record of citizen voices in the larger conversation about arts and culture in the region. Notes would eventually be typed and posted on-line. None of these stated uses required perfect spelling; even if they did, many eyes would see the notes before any

public sharing outside the room. Either a sharp-eyed editor or a computer's spell-check function would undoubtedly catch and correct any spelling errors.

But this one break in the Goffmanian frame of the small group work seemed to engender a rupture in the discussion. While John tried to smooth this small correction over by saying that he is a terrible speller and laughing it off, Lauren began to pay closer attention to what John wrote. This increased attention seemed to make John nervous, which only made sense—he went from a background, "helper" role recording the conversation to being a focus of collective attention and correction.

While it would be possible for the small group to move past this moment with or without Lauren's guidance, this instead became a critical moment in the life of this small group. Following one of the ACES leaders' belief that "in every group, the moderator sets the tone," Lauren set the tone for the rest of the conversation. John's spelling errors compounded, Lauren continued to correct him by spelling out loud, and eventually other group members joined the spelling conversation, correcting John's spelling or simply spelling aloud words they thought might be "challenging" to John. John began to pause before writing a word to hear someone spell it first. Lauren noticed that spelling had taken over the group's conversation. "I was a [librarian] for many years," Lauren said sweetly, nodding her head and crinkling up her face, using what children confused by the Dewey decimal system might find a reassuring tone.

Lauren is a white woman over 60; John is an African American man in earlier middle age. Both are experienced facilitators indeed chosen for this first ACES forum because of their longtime relationship with the project leaders and their work on other similar public conversation. Participants in the small group reflected the racial and age

demographic of the larger forum at the art school: white, middle-aged and older arts patrons, educators, businesspeople, and local organizers. This ACES group, like the ones at the rest of the 13 forums that followed, was overwhelmingly affluent, well-educated, and espoused the value of "diversity."[5] Sometimes "diversity" was named as racial diversity and the specific need for more people of color at the ACES conversation in order to be "representative." Sometimes racial difference was implied as a source of tension.

In this small group, there were moments of robust conversation involving many participants sharing their responses to Lauren's questions, questions being asked by the other facilitators in the other small groups about the users of arts and culture, the uses and benefits of arts and culture in the region, and other related probes geared and hearing the ways that participants understood the value of arts and culture in the larger urban region. But as more and more airtime became devoted to correcting John's spelling, the conversation lost focus and energy. There were many moments where seated participants displayed classic gestures of discomfort and hostility, including several moments where every single one of the 10 group participants had both their arms and legs crossed at once. These uncomfortable gestures became more pronounced as more and more words were spelled out loud.

The final public notes that Lauren and John were responsible for typing up do not reflect this palpable tension. In fact, the final report listed bullet points from the conversation, mostly responses to the ACES-orchestrated list of questions that guided all small group discussion, and comments that "the group was opinionated and vocal. The

[5] There is a fair amount of demographic data about participants at the 14 ACES forums; however, that data comes from anonymous surveys. While generalizations can be made about participants as a whole, none of that survey data can be connected with individuals observed in this particular moment.

evening was a success. The group worked hard and was productive in framing arts and culture in the region. They enjoyed the process and are looking forward to the follow-up in September" (official public notes). Both facilitator and note taker in this group and the other groups were officially responsible for typing the notes; perhaps Lauren completed this task alone, or perhaps John did, or perhaps they worked together. Most of the notes from this small group and others came directly from the chart paper at the forum.

The larger notes listed the small group's concern about regional issues such as "Homelessness; Open space and preservation; Transportation and infrastructure; Schools" among other concerns, and among other considerations of the role of arts and culture in the life of the region (official public notes). The purpose of the conversation was to discuss these issues and record the group's thoughts, not attend to the microsociological interactions among group members, moderator, and note taker.

But it is telling that the experience of the conversation, so fraught with tension, was not reflected in the notes. Again, the group conversation and notes reflect the larger stated goals of ACES and many other attempts at public conversation, which is to talk through certain topics, recording what is said that is on point. For example, there are no public notes about which pastries participants enjoyed eating as they worked in small groups, although there were delicious pastries at this forum, and participants did make some small talk about them as they moved into small groups.

But since these public conversations do not happen in a vacuum, and because the interactions among the moderator and note taker set the tone for group conversation, the ways in which conversation happens, including the moments of discomfort and of ostensible "off topic" discussion, actually help to shape the larger conversation. These

moments also remind us that the cosmopolitan canopy is both a place that enables conversation across difference and limits it, particularly the expression of disagreement. Pleasant, civil conversation on a surface level tends to be the characteristic "talk" under the cosmopolitan canopy. What ACES forums attempt to do is difficult. They invite disagreement and difference, albeit in "civil" and nonconfrontational discussion.

Without this data about how one misspelled word changed the focus of small group conversation, it is easy to sidestep tension, whether a critical moment is seen as a simple misunderstanding, a moment of racial microaggression, or a larger comment on the challenges of inclusive public conversation in a nation scarred by race and class segregation. The official notes include one comment saying, "*Note:* There wasn't enough time for the group to address more regional concerns" (official public notes). This may be an allusion to the time that so much spelling allowed took up; but again, since time was always an issue at ACES forums full of people who chose to spend their evening engaged in public conversation, this may simply be a fact with no hidden meaning.

And yet this particular moment, where the sole visible person of color[6] in a group of 12[7] is endlessly corrected by not only the white moderator of the group but by many other group participants, provides a gruesome but useful illustration of ways in which democratic conversation must attend to social facts, social categories, social cleavages. Is this moment of public spelling simply a microsociological ritual interaction gone

[6] It is certainly not the case that race is always a "visible" fact. But these forums were overwhelmingly organized and attended by people who appeared to be white, and people who appeared to be anything other than white were a visible minority in these groups. Some demographic data is available from surveys, but this anonymous data is not attached to particular people as they participated in the forum. This will be another layer of data to use when addressing issues of race, particularly of whiteness, and its place in the cosmopolitan canopy of conversation.

[7] 10 participants, 2 moderator/note takers

horribly wrong—that perhaps once this sort of interaction begins we cannot get back on the right footing? Is it an example of racial microaggression, where small, ostensibly innocuous acts are meant and interpreted as covert racialized conflict (Solorzano et al., 2000)? What would happen if moderator and note taker shared other visible social characteristics (race, gender)—what if they had an ongoing relationship (were a romantic couple, siblings, etc)? How are we to interpret what happened in this moment? There are many possible answers.

When John and I chat over cubes of cheese at a later forum and again at a training, John says that these forums are "always fun" and "always a pleasure," that he loves to do this work. Neither of us mentions the first forum.

Months later, when I run into Lauren at a performance, she asks me whether the leadership team has chosen moderators for future forums. She comments that she feels that the project leaders prefer certain moderators—she has not been among those favored.

Perhaps as the cheer goes, "Attitude makes the difference!" John makes no public mention of the awkwardness of that early forum where his spelling was criticized by Lauren and finally the entire group. Perhaps he does not see that moment as exceptional. Perhaps he chooses to ignore this experience in favor of his enthusiasm for and participation in the larger project. There is no end to the list of possibilities.

To my knowledge, there were no other instances of public spelling or moments where a moderator corrected or chastised her or his note taker. At forum after forum, however, in small group conversation, race continued to emerge as a topic of importance. Most notable was the way that at least one visibly white participant at every forum took an opportunity to publicly comment on the "whiteness" of the assembled group, on the

"lack of diversity" (meaning racial diversity) or the "need for more diversity" at the forum.

In light of consistent larger group interest in visible racial difference and the "necessity" of having racially "diverse" group present at all public meetings, this moment between John and Lauren is a critical one to explore the ways in which race becomes what Martha Minow calls a "democratic dilemma" (1990). This democratic dilemma of difference suggests that to ignore group difference (such as race) often perpetuates inequality, and that focusing on group difference risks reinscribing inequality.

It is not that race is a static fact, or that it is always visible or unitary—but while "race" may indeed be an illusion, a fiction, a social construct, the lived consequences of race are real. The history of racial difference and of racialized conflict is with us in modern America and her cities, and while change too is a historical fact, so is that of separate black and white America, although race is far more complicated and nuanced than a black/white binary. (Omi & Winant, 1993)

But to ACES participants, this black/white binary, couched in careful terms like "diversity" and what can be "seen" at a glance in a public forum, continues to emerge as a site of conflict and concern. Again, the explicit *naming* of the lack of visible diversity in the 14 ACES forums can be interpreted several ways, all of which may be interesting ways to learn more about the understudied area of white American cultural practices, particularly along the axis of racial difference and how white people construct this axis.

What happened between John and Lauren was not typical of ACES forums, perhaps partly because there are very few moderators of color who regularly work at these forums; in the ACES project, moderators and forum participants were

overwhelmingly white. While people of color did participate on multiple levels, from attending forums to moderating or note-taking at forums to participating on the advisory board, it is still notable that this project appears to be largely white, as participant after participant publicly noted at each forum.

This public recognition of whiteness leads to several other notable aspects of the ACES forum, particularly the way that white participants tend to see "diversity" as a racial issue and black white/binary—and the contradictory finding, which is that white participants often mention that the forum was a space of discovery about "diversity," moving past notions of visible racial diversity to larger thoughts about diversity of experience.

While many moments where visibly white participants raise the public question of why the ACES forums look so white (particularly notable in a city and 5-county area that are far from majority-white) could be dismissed as moments of white privilege and white guilt, where white people raise the specter of race and racial difference in order to exempt themselves from the painful history of American racism, it is white people's understanding of whiteness as race that may be developing in these moments alongside a possible exorcism of guilty consciousnesses. One translation of visibly white participants' public ACES comments for everyone to notice that "there are a lot of white people here" is a cynical one: yet again, people with white privilege are shirking responsibility to talk and act on racial inequality by assuming that discussion about race can only happen with people of color in the room. This argument also goes further to suggest that perhaps white people prefer for black and brown faces and other faces of people of color to be in the room to do the hard work of talking about race. And indeed

discussions of race and racial inequality are hard work—but one of the principles of ACES forums is that *talk is the work of democracy*. Democracy is hard work, it is true, but work that citizens of all colors could be called upon to perform regardless of the racial composition of the room.

Another angle on the attention to whiteness at ACES forums can be found in participants' comments at forums, on surveys, and in interviews. While the ACES forums may lack visible diversity or representation of the demographics of the larger Philadelphia region, through the hard work of conversation and deliberation, white participants found that even in small groups of people who shared many demographic similarities, there was a wide diversity of *experience* in every group. This is a hopeful expansion of binary racial notions of diversity, and provides another aspect of the ACES forums for future analysis.

The ACES forums and similar types of conversation are unconventional but democratic learning sites. These are places where people are learning about themselves, about democratic conversation, and about options for regional change. Some of the things people are learning are old and ugly and reinscribes harmful binaries and hierarchies of oppression—but some of this learning helps us see the Urban Arts Democracy up ahead of us, the unoppressive city and all her glory.

Conclusion

In ACES public forums, while there seems to be remarkable agreement among various constituents that there is both a need for and a lack of "different perspectives" in the "work" of and co-presence at the forums, interactions that silence or critique

difference harshly seem to abound. This is one of the most persistent of democratic dilemmas—what to do with difference. Difference can be perceived as threatening, particularly when difference inheres around race. This is not atypical.

But in a series of forums focused on facilitating conversation across difference, difference becomes not only a dilemma, but perhaps a location for change and for disrupting tired discourses and practice. One of the next steps of this research is to examine further what happens in ACES forums, and what opportunities and challenges this type of organization provides.

How might projects like ACES create spaces where difference can be useful? Many of the participants talk about the "surprising diversity" in a group that at first, second, and even third glance appears (and demographically "is") relatively homogenous. But ACES group can be defined by what members suggest it lacks: "diversity" particularly of age and race. So ACES can be seen as a particular set of practices and perhaps beliefs of largely middle-aged or older, middle-class or higher, educated white people who elect to participate in conversation. It may be useful to look at this type of "public forum" as white people's semi-private space.

One important aspect of the cosmopolitan canopy framework is that "civilized" (or cosmopolitan) behavior in public allows for interactions across difference, but necessarily limits those interactions to either anomalous or to surface/polite (not continuous, deep, etc) interactions. How do we "get deeper"? That polite reserve was questioned by several ACES participants in further interviews, and gets at the heart of *necessary but not sufficient* conditions of democratic conversation. *Or possibly not even necessary,* this cosmopolitan canopy polite veneer. And yet in a city and in a society that

still suffers from a particularly American type of apartheid in residential and social segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), the cosmopolitan canopies are few and far between, and provide for many their only experiences of interaction across social differences.

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