

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Thursday, July 19, 2007

Subject: Movie, *Dinka Diaries*

Location: Harlem Meer moved to church on Lenox (due to rain)

Time: approximately 8-10pm

I saw an article on the “6th Annual Harlem Historic Parks Film Festival” in *Harlem News*, a publication that I picked up somewhere (can’t remember where, unfortunately).

http://www.africanfilmny.org/aff_fest.html

Thursday, July 19

7:30pm **MUSIC :**
DJ L’mani V / DJ Stone

FILM :
Dinka Diaries

(Filmon Mebrahtu, USA, 56m)

In English, Dinka with English subtitles

Over the course of ten months, this film follows the lives of three Sudanese refugees who resettle in the Philadelphia area and adjust to the new American culture and way of life.

The movie was supposed to be held at the Harlem Meer, but it had rained earlier. When I found this event the “rain venue” was to be announced, but the website was updated sometime before that day. **RAIN VENUE : Second Canaan Baptist Church 10 Rev. John P. Ladson Place, 10 Malcolm X Blvd.**

A friend called while I was on the bus and I talked with her as I went to the Harlem Meer, to make sure it wasn’t being held there. As I walked to the Meer from the Lenox bus stop I passed by a number of men, mostly older men, sitting on the benches facing 110th Street. Some spoke in languages I could not identify.

Although I could see that there were no people outside the Discovery Center (next to the Meer), I walked down anyway and found posted signs on the doors. I walked to the church. There were several people standing outside the church. Two white women and a black man hung around the entrance, sitting and standing around metal folding chairs. A white man talked on a cell phone near a pay phone near the street side of the sidewalk. I

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peered in through a window and saw some people sitting on metal folding chairs in a long narrow room. The movie had not started yet.

I stood in a church doorway (the door was closed), talking to my friend about my fieldwork. She has done youth development work, is now doing community block grant work in the East Bay in California, and is keenly interested in this work. She had asked about Baby College and when I did not express enthusiasm for writing up my report she mentioned the time when a participant asked about finding a doctor who will listen to her. I then brought up the young woman looking for housing with the help of In the Spirit of the Children, who was frustrated with the apartment search. A staff member told her that her friends have also spent many months looking for an apartment. The young lady told me later, I bet her friends aren't looking for Section 8 housing. I wondered aloud if service providers have to maintain a cheerfulness so as not to encourage despair, and yet this cheerfulness may work against them. My friend responded that it was the "right message," but suggested that some service providers may be "skipping a step" of expressing "empathy," characterizing this misstep as performed by "people who haven't been through it," with an example of "it" as looking for Section 8 housing. She mentioned that there should be a list of Section 8 properties prepared by the government.

As we talked, I scanned the area. Men, mostly young men, stood and sat in knots in a small park of planters and concrete across the street. One visible young man wore a white wife beater and dark shorts past his knees, with a white doo-rag. A group of young men on lowrider bikes rode by on the sidewalk where I stood. They wove around the chairs and people by the church entrance and by the man talking on the phone. On the other side of the street, a young man rode down the sidewalk into the park doing a wheelie, balanced on the rear wheel.

The white man on the cell phone went inside the church. I took this as a signal and wrapped up my conversation as well, returning the greetings from the white women on my way inside.

Inside about 20 casually dressed people sat in 2 sections of folding chairs arranged in front of a small screen on an easel (maybe 3x4 feet?). Two young men played records on a turntable off to the side. The room was long and narrow, poorly lit with fluorescent lighting. The room looked dingy, with dun linoleum and piles of stuff around the room. (I didn't take a very close look at these piles.) Most of the audience members were middle-aged black women, with a few younger women with children. Several women wore hair wraps. I sat in the second-to-last row on the right side. A young black woman, probably 18-22, came in shortly after I did and sat in the row in front of me. A white woman around my age came in, greeted the other white women, then sat down two rows in front of me by herself. She was the only white person sitting in the audience and I was the only Asian, as usual. (A racially ambiguous man sat in the second row).

Before the feature film, the white man who had been talking on the cell phone outside got up to introduce a short made through a youth media and technology program. I had picked up a flyer on a table on my way in. From the flyer:

As a project of the Conservancy's Youth Leadership Programs, Project 843 is a documentary project in which NYC's young people, led by two experienced filmmakers, develop and produce a documentary series on the unique cultural impact of Central Park on New York City and the world.

He told us that one of the youth was there to answer questions after we watched the film.

The film gave an overview of the history of Central Park and its function as a public space. It included interviews with professors from various local universities and park officials. The look was quite "PBS-ish," with panned shots of old photographs and maps to break up the monotony of looking at talking heads who spoke in subclauses. I found it quite professional: all interviewees were labeled by name and position, and the camerawork was always steady. One of the points made by the film was that Central Park was originally intended for the bourgeoisie to recover from life in an industrial city, but now serves as a place where people of different social classes and backgrounds can mingle. Interestingly, the film showed mostly young white people playing and strolling, then cut to a shot of young black men in baggy clothing playing basketball to show how people mix in the park.

After the film was over, the white man stood up with a young black man. The first question came without pause, from a light-skinned middle-aged black woman who asked with an edge to her voice why they hadn't talked about how the land for the park was procured. The white guy hastily said that he would field that question, and replied that they were working on it, that this was only one of several parts of the film. He reassured the woman that that was an important piece of park history. She settled down, still muttering that they needed to show this.

From wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Park:

Before the construction of the park could start, the area had to be cleared of its inhabitants, most of whom were quite poor and either [free African-Americans](#) or immigrants of either [German](#) or [Irish](#) origin. Most of them lived in smaller villages, such as [Seneca Village](#), [Harsenville](#), the [Piggery District](#) or the [Convent of the Sisters of Charity](#). The roughly 1,600 working-class residents occupying the area at the time were evicted under the rule of [eminent domain](#) during [1857](#), and Seneca Village and parts of the other communities were torn down and removed in order to make room for the park. The person responsible for carrying out the evictions was the great-great grandfather of future [New York Yankee Joe Pepitone](#).

The second question came from a middle-aged woman who could have been Puerto Rican (light skin, dark hair pulled in a tight braid, heavysset), who first praised the film then asked how they chose the people interviewed. If she had an edge in her voice it was much more subtle, but I still got the sense that this was a critical question. The white man explained that he and his partner set up the interviews, but the young people performed and filmed them. He also explained that the young people did most of the work, maybe didn't have their hands on all the editing, but "made all the decisions" about the film.

Other people asked questions, most of which were directed to the white man or fielded by him, about the program and how to join it. He introduced one of the young white woman who was from the Conservancy, and she passed around flyers for his program and for the other programs. One light-skinned young man with a dark blue bandanna covering his large braids (who I call “racially ambiguous”) asked the young man a direct question. I cannot remember the question, but the young man responded by saying that he has always been interested in entertainment. He was a DJ, he told us, then corrected himself to say that he is a DJ. After a few other questions, including the ages of the youth (the white man answered high school), the Racially Ambiguous Man asked the young man where he saw himself in the future. All heads swiveled to him, and I felt the weight of expectation as he stammered out something about working in entertainment. I did not feel that he was nervous, but that this question was a little too big for him.

I'm not sure why the white man felt compelled to answer all the questions. The young man was no expert at public speaking but the questions were hardly complex. I wondered what the two women who first asked questions were thinking.

Next a chic youngish man got up to speak. He introduced himself as part of the festival. He wore a beige newsboy hat, a green polo shirt, and tan pants (corduroy?) with sleek sneakers, white with green and yellow detailing. He thanked the church for hosting the event, mentioned that the event is part of a series, and introduced the film.

The film was quite moving without being overly sentimental or clichéd, selecting monologues and interactions demonstrating how three young men were grappling with their situation. The filmmakers put the young men into boxes (the cultural nationalist, the recently converted Christian, the assimilationist) then refused to keep them there. For example, the “converted Christian” asked his high school classmates what made them American. One young woman responded, “If you live here you are American.” Picking up on an earlier discussion about the (lack of) cultural values among Americans, an African American young woman, cheered on a male sitting behind here, said that she didn't know where she was from, and that cultural values were stripped from her ancestors.

Afterwards people left quite quickly, without speaking to one another. A family went down a hallway further into the church. Most of the others quickly filed out. A couple, including the young woman sitting in front of me, asked the man in the green shirt about the festival. I wanted to speak with the woman who had hinted at the eviction of people to make way for Central Park, but she had already left.

On my way out, around 10pm, the street was just as crowded as at 7pm if not more so. Lone young women walked around the groups of young men.