

“It’s all coming together now”:

An ethnographic study of Princeton University’s Black Arts Company and a glimpse at the effects of globalized hip-hop in a concentrated campus setting

Lavinia Liang

In a Tortoiseshell: *In the following excerpt, author Lavinia Liang fuses anthropological methods with sociological insights to craft an enthralling study of the Black Arts Company. Her unique **method**, showcased below, relies on the synthesis of self-directed ethnography and secondary literature analysis, providing readers with a firsthand account of the dance company coupled with relevant sociological concepts.*

Excerpt

...However, even as we were talking about bodies, I was thinking about how bodies might not be the most important aspect of BAC’s performances and the dancers’ capabilities. Rather, facial expression was probably just as, if not more, important, as the appearance of the rest of the body. I remembered the several times in rehearsals I had seen facial expressions being the reason for concern. Just the rehearsal prior, an Asian female sophomore had been called out for a face inconsistent with that of the rest of the group. I asked my interlocutor, bluntly: “What is the importance of faces in what you do?” She smiled and replied, just as directly: “I’ve been to performances on campus where I know I can’t cheer for my friends because their smiles will break—like I’ve seen it happen...Whereas like with BAC, I know you can say the craziest thing, and our face will not change. And I think it’s because in rehearsal we always, like, say crazy things with the intent of, like well, we’re wild first and foremost!...Saturday late show last semester people threw money on stage for one of the performances!...You just have to roll with it!” The usage of the word “face” in the singular, even when this becomes “our face,” implies that the facial expressions are uniform across members in any given piece (which is true), and that there exists the larger entity of the dance company which requires a collective visage to display to non-company members.

While the “face” my interlocutor was speaking of was physical, and was literally the expression of the faces displayed to the audience during their staged performances, the way “our face” was used collectively in the singular elevates BAC’s conception of “the face” to a more abstract and less physical level. For example, the sociological term “face,” developed and shaped by sociologist Erving Goffman in his work *Interaction Ritual*, refers to the image projected by an individual or a “self” to others—more precisely, it “may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself” (5). In the same way a person can represent a profession or a religion through his behavior—through his projection of “face”—so a BAC member represents the hard work and the discipline the entire company has put into a cohesive, themed show through his or her face. The maintenance of face throughout a performance demonstrates

strength and discipline, and as Goffman writes, is also very telling: “While concern for the face focuses the attention of the person on the current activity, he must, to maintain face in this activity, take into consideration his place in the social world and beyond it” (7). Similarly, BAC’s concern for individual faces is out of a greater concern for the face of the group, and this self-awareness speaks to BAC’s unique positionality within the dance world at large.

Author Commentary

Lavinia Liang

Writing "It's All Coming Together Now" was a challenge in several ways, although the reward of finishing the piece greatly outshone these initial difficulties.

First, I had never written an ethnography before, and although our class was amply prepared with readings on writing ethnographies as well as "practice" situations before our actual fieldwork, the fieldwork itself was exhausting. The ethnographer is always "on." Every action or word in the field was evidence; every action or word could be important.

Secondly, I had to strike a balance between approaching my field-work with an open mind, and imposing what I found to be "obvious" interpretations onto the field that I was studying. While writing this piece, I attended my first BAC rehearsal with a completely open mind, but observations of this rehearsal coupled with secondary literature on hip hop culture immediately gave me the story frame that I wanted to tell. During every subsequent rehearsal I attended, I had to be sure that I was not selectively seeking evidence that should be organic to fit my artificially constructed narrative.

Thirdly, and what is most key to this piece's publication in *Tortoise*, is the balance that I had to create between using my ethnographic field notes and the secondary sources I found for the project. The ethnographer has to write a short story at the same time that he or she is writing a research paper. However, this ended up feeling natural, and like something that I had never done before but really should have been doing my entire life. It pulled from the best of both worlds. In each situation—in each point I wanted to make—I had to figure out if I wanted my fieldwork experiences to support the claims that the secondary literature was making, or vice versa. The role and voice of the "I" in the piece was also a source of nervousness for me, since I am used to removing myself from all my analytic pieces, no matter what. It was a privilege to be able to use the first-person in "It's All Coming Together Now," which that made the narrative part of it even stronger.

Fellow Commentary
Sahand Keshavarz Rahbar

As Lavinia mentions in her commentary, one of the most difficult and fatiguing elements of ethnographic fieldwork is the sheer abundance of primary material. Evidence is plentiful and the possibilities for the interpretation of that evidence seem limitless. Yet despite this overwhelming wealth of possibilities, Lavinia displays incredible discipline and discretion in choosing to tease out a few select excerpts from her fieldnotes and to amplify the potency of her interpretative observations with relevant insights from related subjects. The excerpt published here is typical of this element in her writing, for it shows Lavinia's method of pairing a particular piece of field evidence with a complementary concept from a secondary source.

In this section of her paper, Lavinia focuses her analytical prowess on a particular incident during a BAC rehearsal. First, she transitions expertly from the preceding section, offering a clear trajectory for her readers that proceeds from the consideration of bodies to the consideration of faces. The transition alerts readers to the importance of a dancer's face before proceeding to highlight an event that underscores that importance. But Lavinia is not content with the mere explication of this event. She displays her ethnographic instinct by asking her interlocutor for more information about the uniformity of faces. This dialogue provides Lavinia the opportunity to focus on the idea of a collective face, an important observation that leads naturally to the inclusion of her second paragraph, which provides a sociological lens for the understanding of face. Importantly, even though Lavinia discusses this secondary source at length in the second paragraph, she remembers to tie in these observations to her fieldwork with the dance company, making the connection as clear as possible in the concluding sentence.

The clarity and decisiveness of Lavinia's writing, marked by her ability to advance from transition to event to observation to analysis, is what makes her piece so successful as a piece of scholarship. She employs evidence from her fieldnotes and evidence from her secondary literature selectively, choosing to highlight only those facets that best complement her overarching thesis. By relying on a mutually-reinforcing interplay between her secondary sources and her primary fieldwork, Lavinia's method furnishes us with an especially articulate and focused essay that doesn't lose itself in the abundance of its own evidence.

Works Cited

Goffman, Erving. "On Facework: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction." *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Doubleday, 1967. 5-45. Print.

Bios

Lavinia Liang '18 studies politics and literature. On campus, she performs spoken word with her slam poetry team, plans campus social events, and runs long distance in her free time. She has interests in journalism, public service, creative writing, and other communications work that brings people and disciplines together. Lavinia wrote this essay as a sophomore.

Sahand Keshavarz Rahbar '17 is a History major who was born in Iran and raised in Idaho, an arrangement that has naturally invested him with a deep appreciation for migration and potatoes. He spends his time listening to Regina Spektor while studying race, gender, and law in nineteenth-century America.